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HAWTREY'S DEPUTY



“ Then something seemed to crack, and she saw the off-side horse stumble and plunge.” (Chapter X.)

Hawtrey's Deputy]

[Frontispiece

HAWTREY'S DEPUTY

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HAWTREY'S DEPUTY

CHAPTER I

SALLY CREIGHTON

THE frost outside was bitter, and the prairie, which rolled back from Lander's in long undulations to the far horizon, gleamed white beneath the moon, but this only emphasized the warmth and brightness in Stukely's wooden barn. It stood at one end of the little desolate settlement, where the trail which came up from the railroad thirty miles away forked off into two wavy ribands that melted into a waste of snow. Lander's consisted then of five or six frame houses and stores, an hotel of the same material, several sod stables, and a few birch-log barns; and its inhabitants considered it one of the most promising places in Western Canada. That, however, is the land of promise—a promise which is in due time usually fulfilled—and the men of Lander's were, for the most part, shrewdly practical optimists. They made the most of a somewhat grim and frugal present, and staked all they had—the few dollars they had brought with them, and their powers of enduring toil—upon the roseate future.

Stukely had given them, and their scattered neighbours who had driven in across several leagues of prairie, a supper in his barn, and a big rusty stove, which had been brought in for the occasion, stood in the midst of it. Its pipe glowed in places a dull red, and Stukely now and then wondered uneasily whether it was charring a larger hole through the shingles of the

roof. On one side of the stove the floor had been cleared; on the other benches empty barrels, and tables were huddled together, and such of the guests as were not at the moment dancing sat upon them indiscriminately. A keg of hard Ontario cider had been provided for their refreshment, and it was open to anybody to ladle up what he wanted with a tin dipper, while a haze of tobacco smoke drifted in thin blue wisps beneath the big nickelled lamps. In addition to the reek of it, the place was filled with the smell of hot iron which an over-driven stove gives out, and the subtle odours of old skin coats.

The guests, however, were accustomed to an atmosphere of that kind, and it did not trouble them. For the most part, they were lean and spare, bronzed by frost and snow-glare, and straight of limb, for though scarcely half of them were Canadian born, the prairie, as a rule, swiftly sets its stamp upon the new-comer. There was also something in the way they held themselves and put their feet down that suggested health and vigour, and, in the case of most of them, a certain alertness and decision of character. Some hailed from English cities, a few from those of Canada, and some from the bush of Ontario; but there was a similarity between them which the cut and tightness of their store clothing did not altogether account for. They lived well if plainly, and toiled out in the open unusually hard. Their eyes were steady, their bronzed skin was clear, and their laughter had a wholesome ring.

A fiery-haired Scot, a Highlander of the Isles, sat upon a barrel-head sawing at a fiddle, and the shrill scream of it filled the barn. Tone he did not aspire to, but he played with Caledonian verve and swing, and kept the snapping time. It was mad, harsh music of the kind that sets the blood tingling and the feet to move in rhythm, though the exhilarating effect of it

was rather spoiled by the efforts of the little French Canadian who had another fiddle and threw in random clanging chords upon the lower strings.

They were dancing in the cleared space what was presumably a quadrille, though it bore almost as great a resemblance to a Scottish country dance, or indeed to one of the measures of Bretonne France, which was, however, characteristic of the country. The Englishman has set no distinguishable impress upon the prairie. It has absorbed him with his reserve and sturdy industry, and the Canadian from the cities is apparently lost in it, too, for theirs is the leaven that works through the mass slowly and unobtrusively, and it is the Scot and the *habitant* of French extraction who have given the life of it colour and individuality. Extremes meet and fuse on the wide white levels of the West.

It was, nevertheless, an Englishman who was the life of that dance, and he was physically a bigger man than most of the rest, for as a rule, at least, the Colonial born run to wiry hardness rather than solidity of frame. Gregory Hawtreys was tall and thick of shoulder, though the rest of him was in fine modelling, and he had a pleasant face of the English blue-eyed type. Just then it was suffused with almost boyish merriment, and indeed an irresponsible gaiety was a salient characteristic of the man. One would have called him handsome, though his mouth was a trifle slack, and there was a certain assurance in his manner that only fell short of swagger. He was the kind of man one likes at first sight, but for all that not the kind his hard-bitten neighbours would have chosen to stand by them through the strain of drought and frost in adverse seasons.

As it happened, the grim, hard-faced Sager, who had come there from Michigan, was just then talking to Stukely about him.

"Kind of tone about that man. Guess he once had the gold-leaf on him quite thick, and it hasn't all worn off yet," he said. "Seen more Englishmen like him, and some folks from New York, too, when I took parties bass fishing way back yonder."

He waved his hand vaguely, as though to indicate the American Republic, and Stukely agreed with him. They were also right as far as they went, for Hawtreys undoubtedly possessed a grace of manner which, however, somehow failed to reach distinction. It was, perhaps, just a little too apparent, and lacked the strengthening feature of restraint.

"I wonder," Stukely replied reflectively, "what those kind of fellows done before they came out here."

He had expressed a curiosity which is now and then to be met with on the prairie, but Sager, who was charitable in some respects, grinned.

"Oh," he said, "I guess quite a few done no more than make their folks on the other side tired of them, and that's why they sent them out to you. Some of them get paid so much on condition that they don't come back again. Say"—and he glanced towards the dancers—"Dick Creighton's Sally seems stuck on Hawtreys by the way she's looking at him."

Stukely assented. He was a somewhat primitive person, as was Sally Creighton, for that matter, and he did not suppose she would have been offended had she overheard his observations.

"Well," he said, "I've thought that, too. If she wants him she'll get him. She's a smart girl—Sally."

There were not many women present—perhaps one to every two of the men, which was, however, rather a large proportion in that country—and their garments were neither pretentious nor particularly elegant. The fabric was, in most cases, the cheapest obtainable, and they had fashioned it with their own fingers in the scanty interludes between washing, and baking, and

mending their husbands' or fathers' clothes. Their faces were a trifle sallow and had lost their freshness in the dry heat of the stove. Their hands were hard and reddened, and in figure most of them were thin and spare. One could have fancied that in a land where everybody toiled strenuously their burden was the heavier. One or two of them had clearly been accustomed to a smoother life, but there was nothing to suggest that they looked back to it with regret. As a matter of fact, they looked forward, working for the future, and there was patient courage in their smiling eyes.

Creighton's Sally, who was then tripping through the measure on Hawtrey's arm, was native born. She was young and straight—straighter in outline than the women of the cities—and she possessed a suppleness which was less suggestive of the willow than of a highly-tempered spring. She moved with a large vigour which only just fell short of grace, her eyes snapped when she smiled at Hawtrey, and her hair, which was of a ruddy brown, had fiery gleams in it. Anyone would have called her comely, and there was, indeed, no woman in Stukely's barn to compare with her in this respect, which was a fact she recognized, while every line and pose of her figure seemed expressive of an effervescent vitality.

"Oh, yes," said Sager reflectively; "she'll get him sure, if she sets her mind on it, and there's no denying that they make a handsome pair. I've nothing against Hawtrey either: a straight man, a hustler, and smart at handling a team. Still, it's kind of curious that while the man's never been stuck for the stamps like the rest of us, he's made nothing much of his holding yet. Now there's Bob, and Jake, and Jasper came in after he did, with half the dollars, and they thrash out four bushels of hard wheat for Hawtrey's three."

Stukely made a gesture of concurrence, for he dimly realized the significance of his companion's speech. It is results which count in that country, where the one thing demanded is practical efficiency, and the man of simple, steadfast purpose usually goes the farthest. Hawtreys had graces which won him friends, boldness of conception, and the power of application; but he had somehow failed to accomplish as much as his neighbours did. After all, there must be a good deal to be said for the man who raises four bushels of wheat where his comrade with equal facilities only raises three.

In the meanwhile Hawtreys was talking to Sally, and it was not astonishing that they talked of farming, which is the standard topic on that strip of prairie.

"So you're not going to break that new piece this spring?" she said.

"No," said Hawtreys; "I'd want another team, anyway, and I can't raise the dollars; they're hard to get out here."

"Plenty under the sod," answered Sally, who was essentially practical. "That's where we get ours, but you have to put the breaker in and turn it over. You"—and she flashed a swift glance at him—"got most of yours from England. Won't they send you any more?"

Hawtreys's eyes twinkled as he shook his head. "I'm afraid they won't. You see, I've put the screw on them rather hard the last few years."

"How did you do that?" Sally asked. "Told them you were thinking of coming home again?"

There was a certain wryness in her companion's smile, for though Hawtreys had cast no particular slur on the family's credit he had signally failed to enhance it, and he was quite aware that his English relatives did not greatly desire his presence in the Old Country.

"You really shouldn't hit a fellow in the eye that way, my dear," he said.

As it happened, he did not see the girl's face just then, or he might have noticed a momentary change in its expression. Gregory Hawtrey was a little casual in speech, but so far most of the young women upon whom he had bestowed an epithet of that kind had attached no significance to it. They had wisely decided that he did not mean anything. In another moment or two the Scottish fiddler's voice broke in.

"Can ye no' watch the music? Noo it's paddy-bash!" he cried.

His French Canadian comrade waved his fiddle-bow protestingly.

"Paddybashy! *V'la la belle chose!*" he exclaimed with ineffable contempt, and broke in upon the ranting melody with a succession of harsh, crashing chords.

Then it apparently became a contest as to which could drown the other's instrument, and the snapping time grew faster, until the dancers gasped, and men with long boots encouraged them with cries and stamped a staccato accompaniment upon the benches or on the floor. It was savage, rasping music, but one player infused into it the ebullient verve of France, and the other was from the misty land where the fiddler learns the witchery of the clanging reel and the swing of the strathspey. It is doubtless not high art, but there is probably no music in the world that fires the blood like this and turns the sober dance to rhythmic riot. Perhaps, too, it gains something that gives it a closer compelling grip amidst the prairie snow.

Hawtrey, at least, was breathless when it ceased, and Sally's eyes flashed with the effulgence of the Northern night when he found her a resting-place upon an upturned barrel.

"No," she said, "I won't have any cider." She turned and glanced at him imperiously. "You're not going for any more either."

It was, no doubt, not the speech a well-trained

English maiden would have made, but, though Hawtrey smiled rather curiously, it fell inoffensively from Sally's lips. Though it is not always set down to their credit, the brown-faced, hard-handed inhabitants of that country, as a rule, live very abstemiously, and, as it happened, Hawtrey, who, however, showed no sign of it, had already consumed more cider than anybody else. He made a sign of submission, and Sally resumed their conversation where it had broken off.

"We could let you have our ox-team to do that breaking with," she said. "You've had Sproatly living with you all winter. Why don't you make him stay and work out his keep?"

Hawtrey laughed. "Do you think anybody could make Sproatly work?"

"It would be hard," the girl admitted, and then looked up with a sparkle in her eyes. "Still, I'd put a move on him if you sent him along to me."

She was a capable young woman, but Hawtrey was very dubious as to whether she could bring about this result. Sproatly was an Englishman of good education, though his appearance seldom suggested it, who drove about the prairie in a wagon vending cheap oleographs and patent medicines most of the summer, and contrived to obtain free quarters from his bachelor acquaintances during the winter. It is a hospitable country, but there were men round Lander's who, when they went away to work in far-off lumber camps, as they sometimes did, nailed up their doors and windows to prevent Sproatly from getting in.

"Does he never do anything?" Sally added.

"No," said Hawtrey; "at least, never when he can help it. He had, however, started something shortly before I left him. You see, the house has wanted cleaning the last month or two, and we tossed up for who should do it. It fell to Sproatly, who didn't seem quite pleased, but he got as far as firing the chairs

and tables out into the snow. Then he sat down for a smoke, and he was looking at them when I drove away."

"Ah," said his companion, "you want somebody to keep the house straight and look after you. Didn't you know any nice girls back in the Old Country?"

It was spoken naturally, and there was nothing to show that the girl's heart beat more rapidly than usual as she watched her companion. His face, however, grew graver, for she had touched upon a rather momentous question to such men as he. There are a good many of them living in Spartan simplicity upon the prairie, well-trained well-connected young Englishmen and others like them from Canadian cities. They naturally look for some grace of culture or refinement in the woman they would marry, and there are few women of the station they once belonged to who could face the loneliness and unassisted drudgery that must be borne by the small wheat-grower's wife. There were also reasons why this question had been troubling Hawtrey in particular of late.

"Oh, yes, one or two," he answered. "But I'm not sure that girls of that kind would find things even moderately comfortable here."

There was a reflectiveness in his tone, which, since it seemed to indicate that he had already given the point some consideration, jarred upon his companion. She had also an ample share of the Western farmer's pride, which firmly declines to believe that there is any land to compare with the one the plough is slowly wresting from the prairie.

"We make out well enough," she said with a snap in her eyes.

Hawtrey made a whimsical gesture. "Oh, yes," he admitted; "it's in you. All you want to beat the wilderness and turn it into a garden is an axe, a span of oxen, and a breaker plough. You ought to be

proud of it. Still, you see, our folks back yonder aren't quite the same as you."

Sally partly understood him. "Ah," she said, "they want more, and, perhaps, they're used to it. But isn't that in one way their misfortune? Is it what folks want, or what they can do, that makes them of use to anybody else?"

There was a stern truth in her suggestion, but Hawtreys, who seldom occupied himself with matters of this kind, smiled.

"Oh," he replied, "I don't know. But, after all, it wouldn't be worth while our raising wheat here unless there were folks back East to use it, and if some of them only eat it in the shape of dainty cakes that doesn't affect the question. Anyway, there's only another dance or two, and I was wondering whether I could drive you home; I've got Wyllard's Ontario sleigh."

Sally glanced at him sharply. She had half-expected this offer, and it is possible would have judiciously led him up to it if he had not made it. Now, as she saw that he really wished to drive her home, she was glad that she had not done so.

"Yes," she answered smiling, "I think you could."

"Then," said Hawtreys, "if you'll wait ten minutes I'll be back with the team."

CHAPTER II

SALLY TAKES CHARGE

THE night was clear and bitterly cold when Hawtreys and Sally Creighton drove away from Stukely's barn. Winter had lingered unusually long that year, and the prairie gleamed dimly white, with the sledge trail cutting athwart it, a smear of blue-grey in the foreground. It was—for Lander's lay behind them with

the snow among the stubble belts that engirdled it—an empty wilderness the mettlesome team swung across, and during the first few minutes the cold struck through them with a sting like the thrust of steel. A half-moon hung low above it, coppery red with frost, and there was no sound but the crunch beneath the runners, and the beat of hoofs that rang dully through the silence like a roll of muffled drums.

Sleighs like the one that Hawtrey drove are not common on the prairie, where the farmer generally uses the humble bob-sled when the snow lies unusually long. The one in question had, however, been made for use in Montreal, and bought there by a friend of Hawtrey's, who was, as it happened, possessed of some means, which is a rather unusual thing in the case of a Western wheat-grower. He had also bought the team—the fastest he could obtain—and when the warmth came back to them Hawtrey and the girl became conscious of the exhilaration of the swift and easy motion. The sleigh was light and narrow, and Hawtrey, who shifted his grasp upon the reins when he drew the thick robe higher about his companion, did not immediately remove his hand. The girl did not resent the fact that it rested behind her shoulder, nor did Hawtrey attach any particular significance to the matter. He was a man who usually acted on impulse, with rather easy manners. How far Sally understood him did not appear, but she came of folk who had waged a stubborn battle with the wilderness, and there was a vein of grim tenacity in her.

She was, however, conscious that there was something beneath her feet which forced her, if she was to sit comfortably, rather close against her companion; and it seemed expedient to point it out.

"Can't you move a little? I can't get my feet fixed right," she said.

Hawtreys looked down at her with a smile. "I'm afraid I can't unless I get right outside. Aren't you happy there?"

It was the kind of speech he was in the habit of making, but there was more colour in the girl's face than the stinging night air brought there, and she did not look up at him.

"It's a sack of some kind, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," said Hawtreys; "it's a couple of three-bushel bags. Some special seed wheat Lorton sent to Winnipeg for. Ormond brought them out from the railroad, and I promised I'd take them along."

"You should have told me. It's most a league round by Lorton's place," said Sally.

"That won't take long with this team. Have you any great objections to another fifteen minutes' drive with me?"

Sally looked up at him, and the moonlight was on her face, which was a very winsome one.

"No," she answered, "I haven't any."

She said it demurely, but there was a faintly perceptible something in her voice which might have warned the man had he been addicted to taking warning from anything, which was, however, not the case. It was, in fact, his trouble that he seldom thought about what he did until he was compelled to face the consequences; and it was, perhaps, to his credit that he had, after all, done very little harm, for there was hot blood in him.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to grumble about those extra three miles, but you were asking what land I meant to break this spring. What put that into your mind?"

"Our folks," said Sally candidly. "They were talking about you."

This again was significant, but Hawtreys did not notice it.

"I've no doubt they said I ought to tackle the new quarter section?" he suggested.

"Yes," assented Sally. "Why don't you do it? Last fall you thrashed out quite a big harvest."

"I certainly did. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be many dollars left over when I'd settled the bills."

The girl made a sign of impatience. "Oh," she said, "Bob and Jake and Jasper sowed on less back-setting, and they're buying new teams and ploughs. Can't you do what they do, though I guess they don't go off for weeks to Winnipeg?"

The man was silent. He had an incentive to work hard which she was not acquainted with, and he had done so, but the long, iron winter, when there was nothing that could be done, had proved too much for him. It was very dreary sitting evening after evening beside the stove, and the company of the somnolent Sproatly was the reverse of cheerful. Now and then his pleasure-loving nature had revolted from the barrenness of his lot when he drove home from a casual visit to a neighbour, stiff with cold, through the stinging frost, and, arriving in the dark, found the stove had burned out and water frozen hard inside the house. These were things his neighbours patiently endured, but Hawtrey had fled for life and brightness to Winnipeg.

Sally glanced up at him with a nod. "You take hold with a good grip. Everybody allows that," she said. "The trouble is you let things go afterwards. You don't stay with it."

"Yes," agreed Hawtrey. "I believe you are right, Sally. That's very much what's the matter with me."

"Then," said the girl with quiet insistence, "won't you try to get over it?"

A flush crept into Hawtrey's face. The girl was less

than half-taught, and unacquainted with anything beyond the simple, laborious life of the prairie. Her greatest accomplishments consisted of some skill in bakery and the handling of half-broken teams; but she had once or twice given him what he recognized as excellent advice. There was something incongruous in the situation, but, as usual, he preferred to regard it humorously.

"I suppose I'll have to, if you insist. If ever I'm the grasping owner of the biggest farm in this district I'll blame you," he said.

Sally said nothing further on that subject, and some time later the sleigh went skimming down among the birches in a shallow ravine. Hawtreys pulled the horses up when they reached the bottom of it, and glanced up at the shapeless cluster of buildings that showed black amidst the trees.

"Lorton won't be back until to-morrow, but I promised to pitch the bags into his granary," he said. "If I hump them up the trail here, it will save us driving round through the bluff."

He got down, and though the bags were heavy he managed to hoist the first of them on to his shoulders, with Sally's assistance. Then he staggered with it up the steep foot-trail that climbed the slope. He was more or less accustomed to carrying bags of grain between store and wagon, but his mittened hands were numbed, and his joints were stiff with frost just then, and Sally noticed that he floundered wildly. In another moment or two, however, he vanished into the gloom among the trees, and she sat listening to the uneven crunch of his footsteps in the snow, until there was a sudden crash of broken branches, and a sound as of something falling heavily down a declivity. Then there was another crash, and stillness again.

Sally gasped, and clenched her mittened hands hard upon the reins as she remembered that Lorton's

by-trail skirted the edge of a very steep bank, but she lost neither her collectedness nor her nerve. Presence of mind in the face of an emergency is probably as much a question of experience as of temperament, and, as it happened, she had, like other women in that country, seen men struck down by half-trained horses, crushed by collapsing straw-piles, and once or twice gashed by a mower blade. This was no doubt why she remembered that the impatient team would probably move on if she left the sleigh, and she drove them to the first of the birches before she got down. Then she knotted the reins about a branch, and called out sharply.

No answer came out of the shadows, and her heart beat unpleasantly fast as she plunged in among the trees, keeping below the narrow trail that went slanting up the side of the declivity, until she stopped, with a faint cry, when she reached a spot where a ray of moonlight came filtering down. A limp figure in an old skin coat lay almost at her feet, and she dropped on her knees beside it in the snow. Hawtrey's face showed an unpleasant greyish-white in the faint silvery light.

"Gregory!" she said hoarsely.

The man opened his eyes, and blinked at her in a half-dazed manner. "Fell down," he explained. "Think I felt my leg go—and my side's stabbing me. Go for somebody."

Sally glanced round, and noticed that the grain bag lay burst open not far away. She fancied that he had clung to it after he lost his footing, which explained why he had fallen so heavily, but that was not a point of any consequence now. There was nobody who could help her within two leagues of the spot, and it was evident that she could not leave him there to freeze. Then she noticed that the trees grew farther apart just there, and rising swiftly she ran back for the

team. The ascent was steep, and she had to urge them forward with sharp cries and blows from a mittened hand while they floundered through snapping undergrowth before she reached the spot where Hawtreys lay. He looked up at her when at last the horses stood snorting close beside him.

"You can't turn them here," he said.

Sally was never sure how she managed it, for the sleigh drove against the slender trunks, and the fiery beasts, terrified by the cracking of the undergrowth, were almost uncontrollable; but at last they were facing the descent again, and she stooped and twined her arms about the shoulders of her companion, who now lay almost against the sleigh.

"It's going to hurt, Gregory, but I have to get you in," she said.

Then she gasped, for Hawtreys was a man of full stature, and it was a heavy lift. She could not raise him wholly, and he cried out once when his injured leg trailed in the snow. Still, with the most strenuous effort she had ever made she moved a yard or so, and then staggering, fell with her side against the sleigh. She felt faint with the pain of it, but with another desperate lift she drew him into the sleigh, and let him sink down gently upon the bag that still lay there. His eyes had shut again, and he said nothing now.

It took only another moment or two to wrap the thick driving robe about him, and after that she glanced down, with one hand still beneath his neck. It was clear that he was quite unconscious of her presence, and stooping swiftly she kissed his grey face. Then she settled herself in the driving seat with only a blanket coat to shelter her from the biting frost, and the horses went cautiously down the slope. She did not urge them until they reached the level, for the trail that wound up out of the ravine was difficult, but when the wide white expanse once more stretched

away before them she laid the whip across their backs.

That was quite sufficient. They were fierce beasts, and when they broke into a furious gallop the rush of night wind that screamed by struck her tingling cheeks like a lash of wires. Then all power of feeling went out of her hands, her arms grew stiff and heavy, and she was glad that the trail led smooth and straight to the horizon. Hawtrey, who had moved a little, lay, a shapeless figure, across her feet, but he answered nothing when she spoke to him.

The team went far at the gallop, and the beat of hoofs rose up, dulled a little, in a wild staccato drumming. There was an insistent crunching beneath the runners, and a fine mist of snow beat against the sleigh, but the girl leaning forward, a tense figure, with nerveless hands clenched upon the reins, saw nothing but the blue-grey riband of trail that steadily unrolled itself before her. At length, however, a blurred mass, which she knew to be a birch bluff, grew out of the white waste, and presently a cluster of darker smudges shot up into the shape of a log-house, sod stables, and straw-pile granaries. A minute or two later, she pulled the team up with an effort, and a man, who flung the door of the house open, came out into the moonlight. He stopped, and apparently gazed at her in astonishment.

"Miss Creighton!" he exclaimed.

"Don't stand there," said Sally. "Take the near horse's head, and lead them right up to the door."

"What's the matter?" the man asked stupidly.

"Lead the team up," said Sally. "Jump, if you can."

It was supposed on that part of the prairie that Sproatly had never moved with much expedition in his life, but that night he sprang towards the horses at a commanding wave of the girl's hand. He started when he saw his comrade lying in the bottom of the

sleigh, but Sally disregarded his hurried questions.

"Help me to get him out," she said. "Get farther back, and keep his right leg as straight as you can. I don't want to lift him. We must slide him in."

They did it somehow, though the girl was breathless before their task, which the snow made a little easier, was finished, and the perspiration started from the man. Then Sally turned to the latter.

"Get into the sleigh, and don't spare the team," she said. "Drive over to Watson's and bring him along. You can tell him your partner's broke his leg, and some of his ribs. Start right now!"

Sproatly did her bidding, and when the door closed behind him, she flung off her blanket coat and thrust fresh billets into the stove. Then she looked for some coffee in the store cupboard, and set on a kettle, after which she sat down on the floor by Hawtreys side. He lay still, with the thick driving robe beneath him, and though the colour was creeping back into his face, his eyes were shut, and he was apparently still insensible. It was a relief to sit down, because she was conscious of a distressful faintness, which, as she had come suddenly out of the venomous frost into the little overheated room, which reeked with tobacco smoke and a stale smell of cooking, was not astonishing. She mastered it, however, and presently, seeing that Hawtreys did not move, glanced about her with some curiosity, for this was the first time she had entered his house.

The room was scantily furnished, and, though very few of the bachelor farmers in that country live luxuriously, she fancied that Sproatly, who had evidently very rudimentary ideas on the subject of house-cleaning, had not brought back all the sundries he had thrown out into the snow. It then contained a table, a carpenter's bench, and a couple of chairs, and there were still smears of dust upon the uncovered

floor. The birch-log walls had been rudely panelled with match-boarding half-way up, which was a somewhat unusual luxury, but the half-seasoned boards had rent with the heat, and exuded streaks of resin to which the grime and dust had clung. A pail, which contained potato peelings, stood amidst a litter of old long boots and broken harness against one wall, and the floor was black and thick with grease all round the rusty stove. A pile of unwashed dishes and cooking utensils stood upon the table, and the lamp above her head had blackened the boarded ceiling, and diffused a subtle odour of kerosene.

Sally noticed it all with disgust, and then, seeing that Hawtrey had opened his eyes, she made a cup of coffee and got him to drink it. After that he smiled at her.

"Thanks," he said feebly. "Where's Sproatly? My side stabs me."

Sally raised one hand. "You're not to say a word. Sproatly's gone for Watson, and he'll soon fix you up. Now lie still and shut your eyes again."

The man obeyed her in so far as that he lay still, but his eyes were not more than half-closed, and she could not resist the temptation to see what he would do if she went away. She had half-risen, when he stretched a hand out and felt for her dress, and she sank down again with a curious softness in her face. Then he let his eyes close altogether, as though satisfied, and by and by she gently laid her hand on his.

He did not appear to notice it, and though she did not know whether he was asleep or unconscious, she sat beside him, with compassionate expression. There was no sound but the snapping of the birch billets in the rusty stove. She was anxious, but not unduly so, for she knew that men who live as the prairie farmers do, usually recover from such injuries as had befallen him more or less readily. It would also not be very

long before assistance arrived, for it was understood that the man she had sent Sproatly for had almost gone through a medical course in an Eastern city before he set up as a prairie farmer. Why he had suddenly changed his profession was a point he did not explain, and as he had always shown himself willing to do what he could when any of his neighbours met with an accident, nobody troubled him about the matter.

By and by Sproatly brought him to the homestead, and he was busy with Hawtrey for some time. Then they got him to bed, and Watson came back to the room where Sally was anxiously waiting.

"His idea about his injuries is more or less correct, but we'll have no great trouble in pulling him round," he said. "The one point that's worrying me is the looking after him. One couldn't expect him to thrive upon slabs of burnt salt pork and Sproatly's bread."

"I'll do what I can," Sproatly indignantly replied.

"You!" exclaimed the other. "It would be criminal to leave you in charge of a sick man!"

Sally quietly put on her blanket coat. "If you can stay that long, I'll be back soon after it's light," she said. Then she turned to Sproatly. "You can wash up those dishes on the table, and get a brush and sweep this room out. If it's not quite smart to-morrow you'll do it again."

Then, while Sproatly grinned, she went out and drove away through the bitter frost.

CHAPTER III

WYLLARD ASSENTS

SALLY, who brought her mother with her, spent a couple of weeks at Hawtrey's homestead before Watson decided that his patient could be entrusted

to Sproatly's care ; but she came back afterwards twice a week or so, with odd baskets of dainties to make sure that the latter, in whom she had no confidence, was discharging his duties satisfactorily. She had driven over again one afternoon, when Hawtrey, whose bones were knitting well, lay talking to another man in his little sleeping room.

There was no furniture in it whatever, beyond the wooden bunk he lay in, and a deer-hide lounge-chair he had made during the winter ; but the stove-pipe from the kitchen led across part of it, and then up again into the room beneath the roof above. It had been one of Sproatly's duties during the past two weeks to rise and renew the fire when the cold awakened his comrade soon after midnight. At present he was outside the house, whipsawing birch-logs and splitting them into billets, for which occupation he cherished a profound dislike.

Spring had, however, come suddenly, as it usually does on the prairie, a few days earlier, and the snow was melting fast under a brilliant sun. The bright rays that streamed in through the window struck athwart the glimmering dust motes in the bare room, and fell, pleasantly warm, upon the man who lay in the deer-hide chair. He was a year or two older than Hawtrey, though he had scarcely reached thirty, a man of average height, and tranquil manner, with a rather lean and deeply bronzed face, and somewhat spare figure. He held a pipe in his hand, and was then looking at Hawtrey with quiet, contemplative eyes. They were, indeed, his most noticeable feature, though it was difficult to say whether their colour was grey or hazel-brown, for they were singularly clear, and there was something which suggested steadfastness in their unwavering gaze. He wore long boots, trousers of old blue duck, and a jacket of soft deerskin such as the Blackfoot dress, and there was nothing about him to

indicate that he was a man of varied experience, and of some importance in that country.

Harry Wyllard was native-born, and had in his young days assisted his father in the working of a little Manitoban farm, when that great grain province was still, for the most part, a wilderness. Then a more prosperous relative on the Pacific slope had sent him to Toronto University, where, after a session or two, he had become involved in a difference of opinion with the authorities. Though the matter was never made very clear, it was generally believed that Wyllard had quietly borne the blame of a comrade's action, for there was a vein of eccentric generosity in the lad. In any case, he left Toronto, and the relative, who was largely interested in the fur business, next sent him north to the Bering Sea in one of his schooners. The business was then a remarkably hazardous one, for the pelagic sealers had trouble all round with the Alaskan representatives of American trading companies, whose preserves they poached upon, as well as with the commanders of the gunboats sent up there to protect the seals.

Men's lives were staked against the value of a fur, edicts were lightly contravened, and now and then a schooner barely escaped into the smothering fog with skins looted within forbidden limits. It was a perilous life, and an arduous one, for they had every white man's hand against them, as well as fog and gale, and the reefs that lay in the tideways of almost uncharted waters ; but Wyllard made the most of it. He kept the peace with jealous skippers who resented the presence of a man they might command as mate, but whose views they were forced to listen to when he spoke as supercargo ; he won the goodwill of sea-bred Indians, and drove a brisk trade with them ; and not infrequently brought his boat back first to the plunging schooner loaded with reeking skins.

Then he fell into trouble again when they were hanging off the Eastern Isles under double reefs, watching for the Russians' seals. A boat's crew from another schooner had been cast ashore, and, as they were in peril of falling into the Russians' hands, Wyllard led a reckless boat expedition to bring them off again. He succeeded in so far that the wrecked men were taken off the roaring beach through a tumult of breaking surf, but as they pulled seaward, the fog shut down on them, and one boat, manned by three men, never reached the schooners. They blew horns all night, standing off and on, and crept along the smoking beach next day, though the surf made landing impossible. Then a sudden gale drove them off the shore, and as it was evident their comrades must have perished, they reluctantly sailed for other fishing grounds. As one result of this, Wyllard broke with his prosperous relative when he came back to Vancouver.

After that he helped to strengthen railroad bridges among the mountains of British Columbia, worked in logging-camps, and shovelled in the mines, and, as it happened, met Hawtrey, who, tempted by high wages, had spent a winter in the Mountain Province after a disastrous harvest. In the meanwhile, his father had sold out and taken up virgin soil in Assiniboia. He died soon after Wyllard went back to him, and a few months later the relative in Vancouver also died. Somewhat to Wyllard's astonishment, he bequeathed the latter a considerable property, which Wyllard realized, sinking most of the proceeds in further acres of virgin prairie. Willow Range was already one of the largest farms between Winnipeg and the Rockies.

"The leg's getting along satisfactorily?" Wyllard said at length.

Hawtrey, who appeared unusually thoughtful, admitted that it was.

"Anyway, it's singularly unfortunate that I'm broken up just now," he added. "There's the ploughing to commence in a week or two, and, besides that, I was thinking of getting married."

Wyllard was astonished at this last announcement. For one thing, he was more or less acquainted with the state of his friend's finances. During the next moment or two he glanced meditatively through the open door into the adjoining room, where Sally Creighton was busy beside the stove. The sleeves of her light bodice were rolled up well above the elbow, and she had pretty, round arms, which were just then partly immersed in dough.

"I don't think there's a nicer or more capable girl in this part of Assiniboia," he remarked.

"Oh, yes," said Hawtreys, "anybody would admit that. Still, since you seem so sure of it, why don't you marry her yourself?"

Wyllard looked at his comrade rather curiously. "Well," he answered, "there are one or two reasons that don't affect Miss Sally and only concern myself. Besides, it's highly improbable that she'd have me." He paused to light his pipe, which had gone out, before he spoke again. "Since it isn't Sally, have I met the lady?"

"You haven't. She's in England."

"It's four years, isn't it, since you were over there?"

Hawtreys lay silent a minute, and then made a confidential gesture. "I'd better tell you all about the thing," he said. "Our folks were people of some little standing in the county. In fact, they had just standing enough to embarrass them, as they were far from rich. In most respects they were ultra-conventional, with old-fashioned ideas, and though there was no open break, I'm afraid I didn't get on with them quite as well as I should have done, which is why I came out to Canada. They started me on the land decently, and

twice when we'd harvest frost and horse-sickness, they sent along the draft I asked them for. That is one reason why I'm not going to worry them, though I'd very much like another now. You see, there are two girls, as well as Reggie, who's reading for the Bar."

"I don't think you have mentioned the lady yet."

"She's a connexion of some friends of ours. Her mother, so far as I understood it, married beneath her—a man her folks didn't like. He died, and, when by and by his wife died, Agatha, who was brought up by his relations, was often at the Grange. It's a little, old-fashioned, half-ruinous place, a mile or two from where we live in the North of England. It belongs to her mother's folks, but I think there was still a feud between them and her father's people, who brought her up to earn her living. We saw a good deal of each other, and fell in love as boy and girl. Well, when I went back, one winter, after I'd been here two years, Agatha was at the Grange again, and we decided then that I was to bring her out as soon as I had a home she could live in to offer her."

He broke off for a moment, and there was a trace of embarrassment in his manner when he went on again. "Perhaps I ought to have managed it sooner. Still, things never seem to go quite as one would like with me, and you can understand that a dainty, delicate girl brought up in comfort in England would find it rough out here."

Wyllard glanced round the bare room in which he sat, and into the other, which was also furnished in a remarkably primitive manner.

"Yes," he agreed, "I can realize that."

"Well," said his companion, "it's a thing that has been worrying me a good deal of late, because, as a matter of fact, I'm not much farther forward than I was four years ago. In the meanwhile, Agatha, who has some talent for music, was in a first-class master's

hands. Afterwards she gave lessons, and got odd singing engagements. A week ago, I had a letter from her in which she said that her throat was giving out."

He stopped again for a moment, with trouble in his face, and then, fumbling under his pillow, produced a letter, which he carefully folded.

"We're good friends," he said. "You can read that part of it."

Wyllard took the letter, and a suggestion of quickening interest crept into his eyes as he read. Then he looked up at Hawtreys.

"It's a brave letter—the kind a brave girl would write," he commented. "Still, it's evident that she's anxious."

There was silence for a moment or two, which was only broken by Sally clattering about the stove. Dissimilar in character as they were the two men were firm friends, and there had been a day when, as they worked upon a dizzy railroad trestle, Hawtreys had held his comrade fast when a plank slipped away. It was characteristic that he thought nothing of the matter, but Wyllard was one who remembered things of that kind.

"Now," said Hawtreys, "you see my trouble. This place isn't fit for her, and I couldn't even go across for some time yet, but her father's folks have died off, and there's nothing to be expected from her mother's relatives. Anyhow, she can't be left to face the blow alone. It's unthinkable. Well, there's only one course open to me, and that's to raise as many dollars on a mortgage as I can, fit the place out with fixings brought from Winnipeg, and sow a double acreage with borrowed capital. I'll send for her as soon as I can get the dollars."

Wyllard sat silent a moment or two, and then leaned forward in his chair.

"No," he objected, "there are two other and wiser courses. Tell the girl what things are like here, and just how you stand. She'd face it bravely. There's no doubt of that."

Hawtrey looked at him sharply. "I believe she would, but considering that you have never seen her, I don't know why you should be sure of it."

Wyllard smiled. "The girl who wrote that letter wouldn't flinch."

"Well," said Hawtrey, "you can mention the second course."

"I'll let you have \$1,000 at bank interest—which is less than any land-broker would charge you—without a mortgage."

Again Hawtrey showed signs of embarrassment. "No," he said, "I'm afraid it can't be done. I'd a kind of claim upon my people—though it must be confessed that I've worked it off—but I can't bring myself to borrow money from my friends."

Wyllard, who saw that he meant it, made a gesture of resignation. "Then you must let the girl make the most of it, but keep out of the hands of the mortgage man. By the way, I haven't told you that I've decided to make a trip to the Old Country. We'd a bonanza crop last season, and Martial could run the range for a month or two. After all, my father was born yonder, and I can't help feeling now and then that I should have made an effort to trace up that young Englishman's relatives, and tell them what became of him."

"The one you struck in British Columbia? You have mentioned him, but so far as I remember, you never gave me any particulars about the thing."

Wyllard hesitated, which was not a habit of his. "There is," he said, "not much to tell. I struck the lad sitting down, played out, upon a trail that led over a big divide. It was clear that he couldn't get any

further, and there wasn't a settlement within a good many leagues of the spot. We were up in the ranges prospecting then. Well, we made camp and gave him supper—he couldn't eat very much—and he told me what had brought him there afterwards. It struck me he'd always been weedy in the chest, but he'd been working waist-deep in an icy creek, building a dam at a mine, until his lungs had given out. The mining boss had no mercy on him, but the lad, who seemed to have had a rough time in the Mountain Province, stayed on until he played out altogether."

Wyllard's face hardened as he mentioned the mining boss, and an expressive sparkle crept into his eyes, but after a pause he proceeded quietly—

"We did what we could for him. In fact, it rather broke up the prospecting trip, but he was too far through," he added. "He hung on for a week or two, and one of us brought a doctor out from the settlements, but the day before we broke camp Jake and I buried him."

Hawtreys made a sign of comprehension. He was reasonably well acquainted with his comrade's character, and fancied he knew who had brought the doctor out. He also knew that Wyllard had been earning his living as a railroad navvy or chopper then, and, in view of the cost of provisions brought by pack-horse into the remoter bush, the reason why he had abandoned his prospecting trip after spending a week or two taking care of the sick lad was obvious.

"You never learned his name?" he asked.

"I didn't," said Wyllard. "I went back to the mine, but several things indicated that the name upon their pay-roll wasn't his real one. He commenced a broken message the night he died, but the hæmorrhage cut him off in the middle of it. The wish that I should tell his people was in his eyes."

He broke off for a moment with a deprecatory wave

of his hand, which in connexion with the story was very expressive.

"I have never done it, but how could I? All I know is that he was a carefully brought up young Englishman, and the only clue I have is a watch with a London maker's name on it and a girl's photograph. I've a very curious notion that I shall meet that girl some day."

Hawtrey, who made no comment, lay quiet for a minute or two after this, but his face suggested that he was considering something.

"Harry," he said presently, "I shall not be fit for a journey for a while yet, and if I went over to England I couldn't get the ploughing done, though, if I'm going to be married, it's absolutely necessary that I should get a big crop in."

There was no doubt on the latter point, because the small Western farmer has very seldom a balance in hand, and, for that matter, is not infrequently in debt to the nearest storekeeper. He must, as a rule, secure a harvest or abandon his holding, since, as soon as his crop is thrashed, the bills pour in. Wyllard made a sign of assent.

"Well," said Hawtrey, "if you're going to England you could go as my deputy. You could make Agatha understand what things are like here, and bring her out to me. I'll arrange for the wedding to be as soon as she arrives."

His comrade was not a conventional person, but he pointed out several objections. Hawtrey overruled them, however, and eventually Wyllard reluctantly agreed.

"As it happens, Mrs. Hastings is going over, too, and if she comes back about the same time, the thing might be managed," he said. "I believe she's in Winnipeg just now, but I'll write her. By the way, have you a photograph of Agatha?"

"I haven't," answered Hawtreys. "She gave me one, but somehow it got mislaid one house-cleaning. That's rather an admission, isn't it?"

It undoubtedly occurred to Wyllard that it was. In fact, it struck him as a remarkable thing that Hawtreys should have lost the picture of the girl he was in love with. He sat silent for a moment or two, and then stood up.

"When I hear from Mrs. Hastings, I'll drive round again. Candidly, the thing has astonished me. I always imagined it would be Sally."

Hawtreys laughed. "Sally?" he said. "We're first-rate friends, but I never had the faintest notion of marrying her."

Wyllard went out to harness his team, and, as it happened, did not notice that Sally, who had approached the door with a tray in her hands a moment or two earlier, drew back before him softly. When he had crossed the room, she set down the tray and leaned upon the table, with her cheeks burning. Then, feeling that she could not stay in the stove-heated room, she went out and stood in the slushy snow. One of her hands was tightly closed, and all the colour had vanished from her cheeks. She, however, contrived to give Hawtreys his supper by and by, and soon afterwards drove away.

CHAPTER IV

A CRISIS

WHILE Wyllard made arrangements for his journey, and Sally Creighton went very quietly about her work on the lonely prairie farm, it happened one evening that Miss Winifred Rawlinson sat uneasily expectant far back under the gallery of a concert hall in an English manufacturing town. She could

not hear very well there, but it was the cheapest place she could obtain, and economy was of some importance to her. Besides, by craning her neck a little to avoid the hat of the rather strikingly dressed young woman in front of her, she could, at least, see the stage. The programme which she held in one hand announced that Miss Agatha Ismay would sing a certain aria from a great composer's oratorio, and Winifred leaned forward in her chair, when a girl of about her own age, which was twenty-four, slowly advanced to the centre of the stage.

She was a tall, well-made, brown-haired girl, with a quiet grace of movement and a pleasant face, attired in a long trailing dress of a shimmering corn-straw tint, but when she stood looking at the audience, Miss Rawlinson noticed a hint of tension in her expression. Agatha Ismay had sung at unimportant concerts with marked success, but that evening there was something very like shrinking in her eyes.

Then a crash of chords from the piano melted into a rippling prelude, and Winifred breathed more easily when her friend began to sing. Her voice was sweet and excellently trained, and there was a deep stillness of appreciation when the clear notes thrilled through the closely-packed hall. No one could doubt that the first part of the aria was a success, for half-subdued applause broke out when the voice sank into silence, and for a few moments the piano rippled on alone; but Winifred fancied that the look of tension was still in the singer's face, and once more she grew uneasy, for she understood the cause for it.

"The last bit of the second part's trying," said a young man behind her. "There's an awkward jump of two full tones that was too much for our soprano when we tried it at the choral union. Miss Ismay's

very true in intonation, but I don't suppose most of the rest would notice it if she shirked a bit and left that high sharp out."

Winifred had small knowledge of music, but she was sufficiently acquainted with her friend's character to be certain that Agatha would not attempt to leave the sharp in question out. This was one reason why she sat rigidly still when the clear voice rang out again. It rose from note to note, full and even, but she could see the singer's face, and there was no doubt whatever that she was making a strenuous effort. Nobody else, however, seemed to notice it, for Winifred flung a swift glance round, and then fixed her eyes upon the dominant figure in the corn-straw dress. The sweet voice was climbing, and she longed that the accompanist would force the tone to cover it a little, and put the loud pedal on. He, however, was gazing at his music, and played on quietly until, with startling suddenness, the climax came.

The voice sank a full tone, jarring horribly on the theme, rose, and hoarsely trailed off into silence again. Then the accompanist glanced over his shoulder, and struck a ringing chord while he waited for a sign, and there was a suggestive stirring among the audience. The girl in the shimmering dress stood quite still for a moment with a spot of crimson in her cheek and a half-dazed look in her eyes, after which she moved swiftly off the stage.

Then Winifred rose in dismay and turned upon the young man next her, who looked up inquiringly.

"Yes," she said sharply; "can't you let me pass? I'm going out."

It was about half-past nine when she reached the wet and miry street. A fine rain drove into her face, and she had rather more than a mile to walk without an escort, but that was a matter which

caused her no concern. She was a self-reliant young woman, and accustomed to going about unattended, while she was also aware that the scene she had just witnessed would bring about a crisis in her and her friend's affairs. For all that, she was unpleasantly conscious of the leak in one shabby boot when she stepped down from the pavement to cross the street, and when she opened her umbrella beneath a gas lamp, she pursed up her mouth. There were a couple of holes in it, near where the ribs ran into the ferrule, which she had not noticed before. She, however, plodded on resolutely through the drizzle, until three striplings who came with linked arms down the pavement of a quieter street barred her way. One wore his hat on one side, another nearer the kerb flourished a cane, and the third of them smiled at her fatuously.

"Oh, my!" he said. "Where's dear Jemima off to in such a hurry?"

Winifred drew herself up. She was little and determined, and, it must be stated, not unaccustomed to that kind of thing.

"Will you let me pass?" she said. "There's a policeman at the next turning."

"There really is," said one of them. "The Dook has another engagement. Dream of me, Olivia!"

A beat of heavy feet drew nearer, and the three roysterers disappeared in the direction of a flaming music-hall, where the second entertainment was probably commencing, while Winifred, who had stepped into the gutter to avoid the youth with the cane, looked up as a stalwart, blue-coated figure moved towards her.

"Thank you, officer," she said; "they've gone."

The man merely raised a hand as if in comprehension, and plodded back to his post. Perhaps he felt sorry for young women who have to earn their

living, for he had, at least, appeared promptly when he was needed ; perhaps he attached no great importance to the matter. There is a good deal which the policeman knows and accepts with undisturbed equanimity, that, if plainly expressed, would form a grim commentary on our complex civilization.

In the meanwhile Winifred went on until she let herself into a house in a quiet street, and ascending to the second floor entered a simply furnished room. It, however, contained a piano, while a table, on which a typewriter stood amidst a litter of papers, occupied the opposite side of it. The girl sloughed off her waterproof, and rather flung than hung it on a peg behind the door, after which she sat down in a low chair beside the fire. She was not a handsome girl, and it was obvious that she did not trouble greatly about her attire. Her face was too thin, her figure too slight and spare, but there was usually, even when she was anxious, as she undoubtedly was that night, a shrewdly whimsical twinkle in her eyes, and though her lips were firmly set, her expression was compassionate.

She was, however, not the person to sit idle very long, and in a minute or two she rose and placed a little kettle on the fire, after which she took a few scones, a coffee-pot, and a tin of condensed milk from a cupboard. When she had spread them out upon a table she discovered that there was some of the condensed milk upon her fingers, and it must be admitted that she sucked them. They were stubby fingers, which somehow looked capable.

"It must have been four o'clock when I had that bun and a cup of tea," she said.

She glanced at the table longingly ; for Miss Rawlinson occasionally found it necessary to place a check upon a healthy appetite. She was, however, not singular in this respect, since the practice of

such self-denial is, unfortunately, not unusual in the case of many young women in our cities who work remarkably hard. Still she resolutely shook her head.

"I must wait for Agatha," she said, and crossing the room towards the typewriter table stopped to glance at a framed photograph that stood upon the mantel. It was a portrait of Gregory Hawtrey, taken some years ago, and she apostrophized it with quiet scorn.

"Now you're wanted you're naturally away out yonder," she said. "You're like the rest of them—despicable!"

This seemed to relieve her feelings, and she sat down before the machine, which clicked and rattled for several minutes under her fingers. Then the clicking ceased with sudden abruptness, and she prodded the mechanism viciously with a hairpin. As this appeared unavailing she used her forefinger, and when at length the carriage slid along the rod with a clash there was a smear of grimy oil upon her cheek and slightly tilted nose. After this the machine gave no further trouble, and she endeavoured to make up some, at least, of the time she had spent at the concert. It was necessary that it should be made up, but she was also conscious that she was putting off an evil moment.

At length the door opened, and Agatha Ismay, wrapped in a long cloak, came in. She permitted Winifred to take it from her, and then sank down into a chair. There was a strained look in her eyes, and her face was weary.

"You're working late again?" she said.

Winifred nodded. "It's the men who loaf, my dear," she said. "When you undertake the transcription of an author's scrawl at ninepence the thousand words you have to work unusually hard, especially

when, as in this case, the thing's practicably unreadable. Besides, the woman in it makes me lose my temper. If I'd had a man of the kind described to deal with, I'd have thrashed him."

She was throwing words about, partly to conceal her anxiety, and partly with the charitable purpose of giving her companion time to approach the subject that must be mentioned as she thought best; but she rather over-did it, and Agatha looked at her sharply.

"Winny," she cried, "you know. You've been to the concert.

Winifred turned towards her quietly, for she could face a crisis.

"Yes," she said, "I have, but you're not going to talk about it until you have had some supper. Don't move until I make the coffee."

She was genuinely hungry, but she contrived with various devices that her companion should make a simple meal. Then she bundled the plates into a cupboard, and sat down facing her.

"Well," she said, "you have broken down exactly as that throat specialist said you would. The first question is, How long it will be before you can go on again?"

Agatha laughed, a little harsh laugh. "I didn't tell you everything at the time: I've broken down for good."

There was a moment or two's tense silence after that, and then Agatha leaned forward dejectedly. "He warned me that this might happen if I went on singing, but what could I do? I couldn't cancel my engagements without telling people why. He said I must go to Norway and give my throat and chest a rest."

They looked at one another, and there was in their eyes the half-bitter, half-weary smile of those to

whom the cure prescribed is ludicrously impossible. It was Winifred who spoke first.

"Then," she said, "we have to face the situation, and it's not an encouraging one. Our joint earnings just keep us here in decency—we won't say comfort—and they're evidently to be subject to a big reduction. It seems to me a rather striking coincidence that a letter from that man in Canada, and one from your prosperous friends in the country, arrived just before you went out."

She saw the look in Agatha's eyes, and spread her hands out.

"Yes," she confessed; "I hid them. It occurred to me that you had quite enough upon your mind this evening. I don't know if they're likely to throw any fresh light upon the question what we're going to do."

She produced the letters from a drawer in her table, and Agatha straightened herself suddenly in her chair when she had opened the first of them.

"Oh," she cried, "he wants me to go out to him!"

Winifred's face set hard for a moment, but it relaxed again, and she managed to hide her dismay,

"And," she suggested with a trace of dryness, "I suppose you'll go. After all, he's probably not worse to live with than most of them."

Miss Rawlinson was occasionally bitter, but she had, like others of her kind, been compelled to compete in an overcrowded market with hard-driven men. She was, however, sincerely attached to her friend, and she smiled when she saw the flash in Agatha's eyes.

"Oh," she added, "you needn't try to wither me with your indignation. No doubt he's precisely what he ought to be, and I dare say it will ease your feelings if you talk about him again—at least, it will help you to formulate your reasons for going out

to him. I'll listen patiently, and try not to be uncharitable."

Agatha fell in with the suggestion. It was a relief to talk, and she had also a respect, which she would not always admit, for her companion's shrewdness. She meant to go, but she desired to ascertain how a less interested person would regard the course she had decided on.

"I have known Gregory since I was a girl," she began.

Winifred pursed her lips up. "I understood you met him at the Grange, and you were only there for a few weeks once a year. After all, that isn't a very great deal. It seems he fell in love with you, which is, perhaps, comprehensible. What I don't understand the reason for is why you fell in love with him."

"Ah," said Agatha, "you have never seen Gregory."

"I haven't," Winifred answered sourly. "I have seen his picture, however, and one must admit that he's reasonably good-looking. In fact, I've seen an assortment of them, but it's significant that the last was taken some years ago."

Agatha smiled. "Can a photograph show the clean, sanguine temperament of a man, the impulsive generosity, the cheerful, fearless optimism?"

Miss Rawlinson rose, and critically surveyed the photograph on the mantel. "I don't want to be discouraging, but after studying that one I'm compelled to decide that it can't. No doubt it's the artist's fault, but I'm willing to admit that a young girl could be apt to credit a man with a face like that with qualities he didn't possess." Then she sat down again with a thoughtful expression. "The fact is, you set him up on a pedestal and burned incense to him when you were not old enough to know any better, and when he came home for a few weeks

four years ago, you promised to marry him. Now it seems he's ready at last, and wants you to go out. Perhaps it doesn't affect the question, but if I'd promised to marry a man in Canada, he'd have to come for me. Isn't there a risk in the thing?"

"A risk?"

Winifred nodded. "Yes," she said, "a serious one. Four years is a long time, and the man may have changed. In a new country where everything's different it must be a thing they're apt to do."

A faint, half-compassionate, half-tolerant smile crept into Agatha's eyes. The mere idea that the sunny-tempered, brilliant young man whom she had given her heart to could have changed or degenerated in any way seemed absurd to her. Winifred, however, went on again.

"There's another point," she said. "If he's still the same, which isn't likely, there has certainly been a change in you. You have learned to see things more clearly; you've acquired a different standard from the one you had then. One can't help growing, and as one grows one looks for more. One is no longer pleased with the same things; it's inevitable."

She broke off for a moment, and her voice grew more gentle.

"Well," she added, "I've done my duty in trying to point this out to you, and now there's only another thing to say: since you're bent on going, I'm going with you."

Agatha looked astonished, but there was a hint of relief in her expression, for the two had been firm friends and had faced a good deal together.

"Oh," she said, "that gets over the greatest difficulty."

Winifred's expression was dubious. "I'm not sure that it does. The difficulty will probably

begin when I arrive in Canada, but I'm a capable person, and I believe they don't pay ninepence a thousand words in Winnipeg. Besides, I could keep the books at a store or hotel, and at the very worst Gregory could, perhaps, find a husband. Women, one understands, are after all held in some estimation in that country. There may [be a man out there who would treat even a plain, vixenish-tempered person with a turned-up nose decently."

Crossing the room again she banged the cover down on the typewriter, and then turned to Agatha with a slight haziness in her eyes.

"Anyway, I'm very tired of this one. It would be intolerable when you went away."

Agatha stretched out a hand and drew her down beside her. She, at least, no longer feared adverse fortune and loneliness, and was filled with a gentle compassion, for she knew how hard a fight this girl had made, and a part of what she had borne.

"My dear," she said, "we will go together."

Then she opened the second letter, which she had forgotten in the meanwhile.

"They want me to stay at the Grange for a few weeks," she announced and smiled. "An hour ago I felt crushed and beaten—and now, though my voice has probably gone for good, I don't seem to mind. Isn't it almost bewildering that both these letters should have come to sweep my troubles away to-night?"

"No," said her companion; "it's distinctly natural—just what one would have expected. You wrote the man in Canada soon after you'd seen the specialist, and his answer was bound to arrive in the next few days."

"But I didn't write the folks at the Grange."

Winifred's eyes twinkled. "As it happens, I did, two days ago. I ventured to point out their duty

to them, and they were really nice about it in another letter."

Agatha stretched herself out in the low chair with a sigh of content. "Well," she said, "it wouldn't have the least effect if I scolded you. I believe I'm horribly worn out, Winny, and it will be a relief unspeakable to get away. If I can arrange to give up those pupils, I'll go to-morrow."

Winifred made no answer, and kneeling with one elbow resting on the arm of her companion's chair, gazed straight in front of her. They were both of them very weary of the long grim struggle, and now a change was close at hand.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD COUNTRY

It was a still, clear evening of spring when Wyllard, unstrapping the knapsack from his shoulders, sat down beside a frothing stream in a dale of Northern England. On arriving in London a week or two earlier he had found a letter from Mrs. Hastings, who was then in Paris, awaiting him, in which she stated that she could not at the moment say when she would go home again, but that she expected to advise him shortly. After answering it he started North, and, obtaining Agatha's address from Miss Rawlinson, went on again to a little town which stands beside a lake encircled by towering fells.

He had, however, already recognized that his mission was a delicate one, and made up his mind that it would be advisable to wait until he heard from Mrs. Hastings before calling upon Miss Ismay. There then remained the question how he should occupy himself in the interval. A conversation

with some pedestrian tourists whom he met at his hotel, and a glance at a map of the hill-tracks, decided him, and remembering that he had on several occasions kept the trail in Canada for close on forty miles on end, he bought a Swiss pattern knapsack, and set out on foot through the fells.

Incidentally, he saw such scenery as gave him a new conception of the Old Country, and nearly broke the hearts of his friends the tourists, who volunteered to show him the way over what they evidently considered to be a rather difficult pass. To their great astonishment the brown-faced stranger, who wore ordinary tight-fitting American attire and pointed American shoes, went up it apparently without an effort, and for the credit of the clubs they belonged to, it seemed incumbent on them to keep pace with him. They naturally did not know that he had carried bags of flour and mining tools over very much higher passes close up to the limit of eternal snow, but after two days' climbing they were, on the whole, relieved to part company with him.

A professional guide who overtook them, however, recognized the capabilities of the man when he noticed the way he lifted his feet and how he set them down. This, he decided, was one accustomed to walking among the heather, but he was wrong: for it was the trick the bushman learns when he plods through leagues of undergrowth and fallen branches, or the tall grass of the swamps; and it is a memorable experience to make a day's journey with such a man. For the first hour the thing seems easy, for the pace is never forced, but it also never slackens down; and as the hours go by the novice, who flounders and stumbles, grows horribly weary of trying to keep up with that steady, persistent swing.

Wyllard had travelled since morning along a ridge of fells, when he sat down beside the water and con-

tentedly filled his pipe. On the one hand, high above, a wall of crags was growing black against the evening light, and the stream came boiling down clear as crystal among great boulder stones; but he had wandered through many a grander and more savage scene of rocky desolation, and it impressed him less than the green valley in front of him. He had never seen anything like that either on the Pacific slope or in Western Canada.

Early as it was in the season, the meadows between rock and water were green as emerald, and the hedgerows, just flushed with verdure, were clipped and trimmed as though their owner loved them. There was not a dead tree in the larch copse which dipped to the stream, and all the feathery tassels were sprinkled with tiny flecks of crimson and wondrous green. Great oaks dotted the meadows, each one perfect in symmetry. It seemed that the men who held this land cared for single trees. The sleek, tame cattle that rubbed their necks on the level hedge-top and gazed at him ruminatively, were very different from the wild, long-horned creatures whose furious stampede he had now and then headed off, riding hard while the roar of hoofs rang through the dust-cloud that floated like a sea fog across the sun-scorched prairie. Here, he thought, all went smoothly; the whole vale was steeped in tranquil peacefulness.

Then he noticed the pale primroses that pushed up their yellow flowers among the withered leaves, and the faint blue sheen beneath the beech trunks not far away. There was a trace of the artistic temperament in this man, and the elusive beauty of these things appealed to him. He had seen the riotous, sensuous blaze of blossom kissed by Pacific breezes, and the burnished gold of wheat that rolled in mile-long waves; but it struck him that the wild

things of the English North were, after all, more wonderful. They matched its deep peacefulness; their beauty was chaste, fairy-like, and ethereal.

By and by a wood-pigeon cooed softly somewhere in the shadows, and a brown thrush perched on a bare oak bough began to sing. The broken, repeated melody went curiously well with the rippling murmur of sliding water, and Wyllard leaned back with a smile to listen, though he could not remember ever having done anything of that kind before. His life had been a strenuous one, spent for the most part in the driving-seat of great ploughs that rent their ample furrows through virgin prairie, guiding the clinking binders through the wheat under a blazing sun, or driving plunging dories through the clammy fog over short, slopping seas. Now, however, the tranquillity of the English valley stole in on him, and he began to understand how the love of this well-trimmed land clung to the men out West, who spoke of it with tenderness as the Old Country.

Then, for he was in an unusually susceptible mood, he took a little deerhide case, artistically made by a Blackfoot Indian, from his pocket, and extracted from it the somewhat faded photograph of an English girl. He had got it from the lad he had buried among the ranges of the Pacific slope, and it had been his companion in many a desolate camp and on many a weary journey. The face was delicate and refined, with a freshness in it which is, perhaps, seldom seen outside the Old Country; but what pleased him more was the serenity in the clear, innocent eyes.

He was not in love with the picture—he would naturally have smiled at the notion—but he had a curious feeling that he would meet the girl some day, and that it would then be a privilege only to speak to her. This was, after all, not so extravagant

a fancy as it might appear, for romance, the mother of chivalry and many graces, still finds shelter in the hearts of such men who dwell in the wide spaces of the newer lands. Shrewd as they are, and practical, they see visions now and then, and, what is more, transform them into realities with bleeding hands and toil incredible.

By and by he put the photograph back in his pocket, and filled his pipe again, while it was almost dark before he had smoked it out. The thrush had gone, and only the ripple of the water broke the silence, until he heard footsteps on the stones behind him. Then, looking round, he saw a young woman approaching the river, and he watched her with growing interest, for his perceptions were sharper than usual, and it occurred to him that she was very much in harmony with what he thought of as the key-note of the place. She was tall and shapely, and moved with a quiet grace. When she stopped a moment, poised upon a shelf of rock as though considering the easiest way to the water, her figure fell into reposeful lines, but that was only what he had expected, for he now remembered that he had half-consciously studied the Englishwomen he had met upon the prairie.

The Western women usually moved, and certainly spoke, with an almost superfluous vivacity and alertness. There was in them a feverish activity, which contrasted with the English deliberation. The latter had sometimes exasperated him, but it was becoming comprehensible, and taking on a more favourable aspect now. It was, he felt, born of the calm of this well-kept land, a steadfastness that progressed slowly by system and rule, and he recognized that it would have troubled his sense of fitness if this girl had clattered down across the stones hurriedly and noisily.

As yet he could not see her face, but when she went on a little further, it became evident that she desired to cross the river, and was regarding the row of stepping-stones somewhat dubiously. One or two had fallen over, or been washed away by a flood, for there were several rather wide gaps between them, through which the stream frothed whitely. As soon as Wyllard noticed this, he rose and moved towards her.

"Do you want to get across?" he said.

She was still glancing at the stones, but although he did not think she had seen him or heard his approach, she turned towards him quietly. Then a momentary sense of astonishment held him embarrassed, for it was her picture he had gazed at scarcely half an hour ago. He would have recognized her anywhere.

"Yes," she said. "It is some distance round by the bridge, but several of the stones have disappeared since I last came this way."

She spoke, as Wyllard had expected, softly and musically, but he was first of all a man of action, and, somewhat to her astonishment, he forthwith waded into the river. Then he turned and held out his hand to her.

"It isn't a very long step to the nearest stone. You ought to manage it," he said.

The girl favoured him with a swift glance of scrutiny. At first she had supposed him to be one of the walking tourists or climbers who invaded that valley now and then; but they were, for the most part, young men from the cities, and this stranger's face was darkened by the sun. There was also an indefinite suggestion of strength in the pose of his lean, symmetrical figure, which, though she did not recognize that fact, could only have come from healthful labour in the open air. She noticed, how-

ever, that while the average Englishman would have asked permission to help her, or have deprecated the offer, this stranger did nothing of the kind. He stood with the water frothing about his ankles, holding out his hand.

She had no hesitation about taking it, and while he waded through the river she stepped lightly from stone to stone until she came to a wider gap, where the stream was deeper. Then she stopped a moment, gazing at the bubbling water until the man's grasp tightened on her fingers, and she felt his other hand rest upon her waist.

"Now," he said, "I won't let you fall."

She was across the gap in another moment, wondering somewhat uneasily why she had obeyed the compelling pressure, but glad to see that his face was perfectly unmoved, and that he was quite unconscious of having done anything unusual. She crossed without mishap, and when they stood on the shingle, he released her hand.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm afraid you have got wet."

The man laughed, and he had a pleasant laugh. "Oh," he said, "I'm used to it. Isn't there a village with an hotel in it, a mile or two from here?"

"Yes," replied the girl, "this is the way. The path goes up to the high-road through the larch wood."

She turned into it, and though she had not expected this, the man walked beside her. Still, she did not resent it. His manner was deferential, and she liked his face, while there was, after all, no reason why he should stay behind when he was going the same way. He accompanied her silently for several minutes as they went on through the gloom of the larches, where a sweet, resinous odour crept into the still, evening air, and then he looked up as they came to a towering pine.

"Have you got many of those trees over here?" he asked.

Then a light dawned upon the girl, for, though he had spoken without perceptible accent, she had been puzzled by something in his speech and appearance.

"I believe they're not uncommon. You are an American?" she said.

Wyllard laughed. "No," he said. "I was born in Western Canada, but I think I'm as English as you are, in some respects, though I never quite realized it until to-night. It isn't exactly because my father came from this country, either."

The girl was a trifle astonished at this answer, and still more at the indefinite something in his manner which seemed to indicate that he expected her to understand, as, indeed, she did. Her only dowry had been an expensive education, and she remembered that the influence of the isle she lived in had in turn fastened on Saxons, Norsemen, Normans, and made them Englishmen. What was more, so far as she had read, those who had gone out South or Westwards had carried that influence with them and, under all their surface changes, and sometimes their grievances against the Motherland, were, in the great essentials, wholly English still.

"But," she asked at random, "how can you be sure that I'm English?"

It was dark among the trees, but she fancied there was a smile in her companion's eyes.

"Oh," he answered simply, "you couldn't be anything else!"

She accepted this as a compliment, though she fancied that it had not been his direct intention to pay her one. His general conduct since she had met him scarcely suggested such a lack of sense. She was becoming mildly interested in this stranger, but she possessed several essentially English char-

acteristics, and it did not appear advisable to encourage him too much. She said nothing further, and a few minutes passed before he spoke again.

"I wonder," he said, "if you knew a young lad who went out to Canada some six years ago. His name was Pattinson—Henry Pattinson."

"No," said his companion, "I certainly did not. Besides, the name is not an uncommon one. There are a good many Pattinsons in the North."

Wyllard was not astonished at this answer. He had reasons for believing that the name of the lad he had befriended was not his correct one. It would, of course, have been easy to describe him, but Wyllard was shrewd, and noticing that there was now a restraint in his companion's manner, he was not prepared to do that yet. He was aware that most of the English are characterized by reserve, and apt to retire into their shells if pressed too hard. He did not, however, mean to let this girl elude him altogether.

"It really doesn't matter," he replied. "I shall no doubt get upon his trail in due time."

They reached the high-road a minute or two later, and the girl turned to him.

"Thank you again," she said. "If you go straight on you will come to the village in about a quarter of an hour."

Then she turned away and left him standing with his soft hat in his hand, and, as it happened, he stood quite still for almost a minute after she had gone. In due time, however, he reached the inn he had inquired about, and its old-world simplicity delighted him. It was built, feet thick, of slate stone, against the foot of the fell, and roofed, as he noticed, with ponderous flags. In Canada, where the frost was Arctic, they used thin cedar shingles. The room in which he took his meal was panelled with oak that

had turned black with age. Great rough-hewn beams of four times the size that anybody would have used for the purpose in the West supported the low ceiling, and—for there was a fire on the wide hearth—the ruddy gleam of burnished copper utensils pierced the shadows. The room was large, and there was only a single candle upon the table, but he felt that a garish light would somehow be out of harmony with the atmosphere of that interior.

By and by his hostess appeared to clear the plates away. She was a little, withered old woman, immaculately neat, with shrewd, kindly eyes, and a russet tinge in her cheeks.

“There’s a good light and company in the sitting-room,” she informed him. “We’ve three young men staying with us. They’ve been up the Pike.”

“I’d sooner stay here, if I may,” said Wyllard. “I don’t know yet if I’ll go on to-morrow. One can get through to Langley Dale by the Hause, as I think you call it?”

The wrinkled dame replied that pedestrians often went that way, and Wyllard asked a question casually.

“Are there any prosperous folks—people of station—living round here?”

“There’s the vicar. I don’t know that he’s what you’d call prosperous. Then there’s Mr. Martindale, of Rushyholme, and Little, of the Ghyll.”

“Has one of them a daughter of about twenty-four years of age?” and Wyllard described the girl he had met to the best of his ability.

It was evident that the landlady did not recognize the description, but she seemed to consider.

“No,” she said, “there’s nobody like that; but I did hear that they’d a young lady staying at the vicarage.”

Then she changed the subject abruptly, and

Wyllard once more decided that the English did not like questions.

"You're a stranger, sir?" she asked.

"I am," said Wyllard. "I've some business to attend to further on, but I came along to see the fells, and I'm glad I did. It's a great and wonderful country you're living in. That is," he added gravely, "when you get outside the towns. There are things in some of them that most make one ill."

Then he stood up. "That tray's too heavy for you. Won't you let me carry it?"

The landlady looked astonished, but she made it clear that she desired no assistance, and when she went out, Wyllard, who sat down again, took out the photograph. He gazed at it steadfastly, and then put it back into his pocket.

"There's rather more than mere prettiness there, but I don't know that I want to keep it now," he remarked, "It's far short of the original. She has grown in the meanwhile—just as one would expect that girl to grow."

Then he lighted his pipe, and smoked thoughtfully until at length he arrived at a decision.

"One can't force the running in this country. They don't like it," he said. "I'll lie by a day or two, and keep an eye on the vicarage."

In the meanwhile his hostess was discussing him with a niece.

"I'm sure I don't know what that man is," she informed the younger woman. "He has the manners of a gentleman, but he walks like a fell shepherd, and his hands are like a navvy's. A man's hands now and then tell you a good deal about him. Besides, of all things, he wanted to carry his tray away. Said it was too heavy for me."

"Oh," said her niece, "he's an American. There's no accounting for them."

CHAPTER VI

HER PICTURE

WYLLARD stayed at the inn three days without seeing anything more of the girl he had met beside the stream, though he diligently watched for her. For one thing, he had long felt it was his duty to communicate with the relatives of the lad he had befriended, and the fact that he had found her photograph in the young Englishman's possession made it appear highly probable that she could assist him in tracing them. Apart from this, he could not analyse his motives for wishing to see more of her, though he was conscious of the desire. Her picture had, however, been a companion to him in his wanderings, and he had, indeed, occasionally found a solace in gazing at it, while now he had seen her in the flesh he was willing to admit that he had never met any woman who had made the same impression on him. What he meant by that he was not quite sure; but it was in the meanwhile as far as he would go.

It was, of course, open to him to call at the vicarage, but though he meant to adopt that course as a last resort, there were objections to it. He did not even know the girl's name, and there was nobody to say a word for him; while, so far as his experience went, the English were apt to be reticent and reserved to a stranger. It seemed to him that, although she might give him the information he required, their acquaintance would probably terminate then and there, which was not what he desired. She would, he decided, be less likely to stand upon her guard if he could contrive to meet her casually without prearrangement.

On the fourth day fortune favoured him, for he came upon her endeavouring to open a tottering gate where a stony hill track led off from the smooth

white road. As it happened, he had received a letter from Mrs. Hastings that morning, fixing the date of her departure, which rendered it necessary for him to discharge the duty Hawtrey had saddled him with as soon as possible. The Grange, where he understood Miss Ismay was then staying, lay some distance away across the fells, and he had already decided to start early on the morrow. That being the case, it was clear that he must make the most of this opportunity; but he also realized that it would be advisable to proceed with circumspection. Saying nothing, he set his shoulder to the gate, and lifting it on its decrepit hinges swung it open.

"Thank you," said the girl, and then, remembering that this was the last thing she had said to him, smiled as she added, "It is the second time you have turned up when I was in difficulties."

In spite of his resolution to proceed cautiously, a twinkle crept into Wyllard's eyes, and suggested that the fact she had mentioned was not so much of a coincidence as it appeared. She saw it, and was about to pass on, when he stopped her with a gesture. He was usually a candid person.

"The fact is, I have been looking out for you the last three days," he said.

He fancied the girl had taken alarm at this, and spread his hands out deprecatingly. "Won't you hear me out?" he added. "There's a matter in which you can help me. I won't keep you long."

His companion was puzzled, and naturally curious. It struck her as strange that his unexpected confusion should have roused in her very little indignation; but she felt that it would be unreasonable to suspect this man of anything that savoured of impertinence. His manner was reassuring, and she liked his face.

"Well?" she said inquiringly.

The man indicated a big oak trunk that lay just inside the gate.

"If you'll sit down, I'll get through as quick as I can," he replied. "In the first place, I am, as I told you, a Canadian, come over partly to see the country, and partly to carry out two duties. It is in regard to one of the latter I believe you can help me."

His companion's face was expressive of bewilderment.

"I could help you?"

Wyllard nodded. "I'll explain my reasons for believing it later on," he said. "In the meanwhile I asked you a question the other night, which I'll now try to make more explicit. Were you ever acquainted with a young Englishman who went to Canada from this country six years ago? He would be about twenty then, and had dark hair and eyes. That, of course, isn't remarkable, but there was a curious white mark on his left temple. If he was ever a friend of yours, the scar ought to locate him."

"Oh!" said the girl, "that must have been Lance Radcliffe. I was with him when the scar was made—ever so long ago. But you said his name was Pattinson, and we heard that he was dead."

"I did," Wyllard answered gravely. "Still, I wasn't quite sure of it, and he's certainly dead. I buried him."

His companion was obviously astonished, and he saw the sudden softening of her eyes. There was, however, only a gentle pity in them, and not the consternation he had half expected. This was a relief to him.

"Then," she said, "you must be the man his father has often wished to meet. There was some trouble between them—I don't know which was wrong—and Lance went out to Canada, and never

wrote. By and by, Major Radcliffe tried to trace him through a Vancouver banker, and only found that he had died in the hands of a stranger who had done all that was possible for him." She turned to Wyllard with a look which set his heart beating faster than usual. "You are that man?"

"Yes," said Wyllard simply. "I did what I could for him. It didn't amount to very much. He was too far gone."

Then at her request he told her the story he had told to Hawtrey, and when he had finished, her face was soft again, for it had stirred her.

"But," she said, "he had no claim on you."

Wyllard lifted one hand as if in expostulation. "He was dying in the bush. Wasn't that enough?"

The girl made no answer for a moment or two. She had earned her living for several years, and was, because of it, to some extent acquainted with the grim realities of life. She did not know that while there are hard men in Canada, the small farmers and ranchers of the West—and, perhaps, above all, the fearless freelances who build railroads and grapple with giant trees in the forests of the Pacific slope—are, as a rule, distinguished by a splendid charity. With them the sick or worn-out stranger is very seldom turned away. Still, watching her companion covertly, she understood that this man whom she had seen for the first time three days ago, had done exactly what she would have expected of him. Then she proceeded to give him the information she supposed he desired.

"I saw a good deal of Lance Radcliffe—when I was younger," she said. "His people still live at Garside Scar, close by Dufton Holme. I presume you will call on them?"

Wyllard said that he intended to do so, as he had a watch and one or two other mementoes that they

might like to have, and when she told him how to reach Dufton Holme by a very roundabout railway journey, he supposed it lay somewhere in the dale to which he had decided on going. Then she turned to him again.

"There is one point that puzzles me," she said. "How did you know that I could tell you anything about him?"

The man thrust his hand into his pocket, and took out a leather case.

"You are by no means a stranger to me," he answered, and quietly handed her the photograph. "This is your picture; I found it among the dead lad's things."

The girl, who started visibly, flashed a very keen glance at him. There was, however, no doubt that he had not intended to produce any dramatic effect. Then she flushed.

"I never knew he had it," she said. "Perhaps he got it from his sister." She paused, and then, as though impelled to make the fact clear, added, "I never gave it to him."

Wyllard smiled gravely, for he recognized that while she was clearly grieved to hear of his death, she had no particular tenderness for the unfortunate lad. He was, however, a little off his guard.

"Well," he answered, "perhaps he took it in the first place for the mere beauty of it, and it afterwards became a companion—something that connected him with the Old Country. It appealed in one of those ways to me."

Again she flashed a sharp glance at him, but he went on unheeding:

"When I found it, I meant to keep it merely as a clue, and so that it could be given up to his relatives some day," he added. "Then I fell into the habit of looking at it in my lonely camp in the bush at

night, and when I sat beside the stove while the snow lay deep upon the prairie. There was something in your eyes that seemed to encourage me."

"To encourage you?"

"Yes," said Wyllard, "I think that expresses it. When I camped in the bush of the Pacific slope, we were either out on the gold trail—and we generally came back ragged and unsuccessful after spending several months' wages which we could badly spare—or I was going from one wooden town to another without a dollar in my pocket and wondering how I was to obtain one when I got there. For a time it wasn't much more cheerful on the prairie; twice in succession the harvest failed. Perhaps Lance Radcliffe felt as I did."

The girl cut him short. "Why didn't you mention the photograph at once?"

Wyllard smiled at her. "Oh," he said, "I didn't want to be precipitate—your folks don't seem to like that; I've met them out West. I think"—and he seemed to consider—"I wanted to make sure you wouldn't be repelled by what might look like Colonial *brusquerie*. You see, you have been over snow-barred divides and through great shadowy forests with me. We've camped among the boulders by lonely lakes and gone down frothing rapids. I felt—I can't tell you why—that I was bound to meet you some day."

It was a trifle startling, but the girl now showed neither astonishment nor resentment. She knew that this stranger was not posing or speaking for effect. It did not occur to him that he might have gone too far, and for a space he leaned against the gate, saying nothing, while she looked at him with what he thought of as her gracious English calm.

Pale sunshine fell upon them, though the larches beside the road were rustling beneath a cold wind,

and the song of the river came up brokenly out of the valley. An odour of fresh grass floated about them, and the dry, cold smell of the English spring was in the air. Across the valley dim ghosts of hills lighted by evanescent gleams rose out of the greyness with shadowy grandeur.

Then Wyllard seemed to rouse himself. "I wonder if I ought to write Major Radcliffe and tell him what my object is before I call?" he said. "It would make the thing easier for both of us."

The girl rose. "Yes," she assented, "that would be the wiser course." Then she glanced at the photograph which she was still holding. "It has served its purpose. I scarcely think it would be of any great interest to Major Radcliffe."

She saw his face change as she made it evident that she did not mean to give the portrait back to him; but there was, at least, one excellent reason why she would not have her picture in a strange man's hands.

"Thank you," she said, "for the story. I am glad we have met; but I'm afraid I have already kept my friends waiting for me."

Then she turned away, and it struck Wyllard that he had made a very indifferent use of the opportunity, since she had neither asked his name nor told him hers. It was, however, evident that he could not well run after her and demand it, and he decided that he could in all probability obtain it from Major Radcliffe when he called upon him. Still, he regretted his lack of adroitness as he walked back to the inn, where he wrote two letters when he had consulted a map and his landlady. Dufton Holme, he discovered, was a small village within a mile or two of the Grange, where, as Miss Rawlinson had informed him, Agatha Ismay was then staying. One letter was addressed to her, formally asking

permission to call upon her with a message from Gregory Hawtreay. The other was to Major Radcliffe, and in both he said that an answer would reach him at the inn which his landlady had informed him was to be found not far from either of the houses he proposed to visit.

He started on foot next morning, and, climbing a steep pass, followed a winding track across a waste of empty moor until he struck a smooth white road, which led past a rock-girt lake and into a deep valley. It was six o'clock when he set out, and three when he reached the inn, where he found an answer to one of his letters awaiting him. It was from Major Radcliffe, who desired an interview as soon as possible.

Within an hour he was on his way to the Major's house, where he was shown into a room in which there sat a lady and a grey-haired man, whose yellow skin suggested long exposure to a tropical sun. They received him graciously, but there was an indefinite something in their manner and bearing which Wyllard, who had read a good deal, recognized, though he had never been brought into actual contact with it until then. He felt that he could not have expected to come across such people anywhere but in England, unless it was at the headquarters of a British battalion in India.

He told his story tersely, softening unpleasant details, and making little of what he had done. The grey-haired man listened gravely with an unmoved face, though a trace of moisture crept into the lady's eyes. There was silence for a moment or two when he had finished, and then Major Radcliffe, whose manner was very quiet, turned to him.

"You have laid me under an obligation which I could never wipe out, even if I wished it," he said. "It was my only son you buried out there in Canada."

He broke off for a moment, and his quietness was more marked than ever when he went on again.

"As you have no doubt surmised, we quarrelled," he said. "He was extravagant and careless—at least I thought so then—but now it seems to me that I was unduly hard on him. His mother"—and he turned to the little lady with an inclination that pleased Wyllard curiously—"was sure of it at the time. In any case, I took the wrong way, and he went out to Canada. I made that, at least, easy for him—and I have been sorry ever since."

He paused again with an expressive gesture. "I think it's due to him, and you, that I should tell you this. When no word reached us, I had inquiries made, through a banker he called upon, who, discovering that he had registered at an hotel as Pattinson, at length traced him to a British Columbian silver mine. He had, however, left it shortly afterwards, and all my correspondent could tell me was that an unknown prospector had nursed him until he died."

Wyllard, who said nothing, took out a watch and the clasp of a workman's belt from his pocket, and laid them gently on the lady's knee. He saw her eyes fill, and turned his head.

"I feel that you may blame me for not writing sooner, but it was only a very little while ago I was able to trace you, and then it was only by a very singular—coincidence," he said presently.

This was the most apposite word that occurred to him, for he did not consider it advisable to mention the photograph. It struck him that the girl would not like it. Nor, though he was greatly tempted, did he care to make inquiries concerning her just then. In another moment or two the Major spoke again.

"If I can make your stay here pleasanter in any way, I should be delighted," he said. "If you will

take up your quarters with us I will send down to the inn for your things."

Wyllard excused himself, but when the lady urged him at least to dine with them on the following evening, he felt tempted to consent.

"The one difficulty is that I don't know yet whether I shall be engaged then," he explained. "As it happens, I've a message for Miss Ismay, at the Grange, and I wrote offering to call upon her at any convenient hour. So far, I have heard nothing from her."

"She's away," Mrs. Radcliffe informed him. "They have probably sent your letter on to her. I had a note from her yesterday, however, and expect her here to-morrow. You have met some friends of hers in Canada?"

"Gregory Hawtrey," said Wyllard. "I have promised to call upon his people, too."

He saw Major Radcliffe glance at his wife, and the faint smile in the latter's eyes.

"Well," she said, "if you will promise to come I will send word over to Agatha."

Wyllard agreed to this, and went away a few minutes later. He noticed the tact and consideration with which his new friends had refrained from showing any sign of the curiosity he fancied they naturally felt, for Mrs. Radcliffe's expression had suggested that she understood the situation, which was, however, commencing to appear a little more difficult to him. It was his task to explain to a girl brought up among such people delicately what she must be prepared to face as a farmer's wife in Western Canada. He was not sure that this would be easy in itself, but it was rendered much harder by the fact that Hawtrey would expect him to accomplish it without unduly daunting her. Her letter had suggested courage, but it was the courage of ignorance, and he had now some notion of the life of ease and refinement

her English friends led. He was beginning to feel sorry for Agatha Ismay.

CHAPTER VII

AGATHA DOES NOT FLINCH

NEXT evening Wyllard sat with Mrs. Radcliffe in a big low-ceilinged room at Garside Scar, looking about him with quiet interest. He had now and then spent a day or two in huge Western hotels, but he had never seen anything like that room. The comfort of its arrangements appealed to him, but he was not one who had ever studied his bodily ease very much, and what he regarded as the chaste refinement of its adornment had a deeper effect. Though he had lived for the most part in the bush and on the prairie, he had been endued with, or had somehow acquired, an artistic susceptibility.

The furniture was old, and, indeed, a trifle shabby, but it was, as he noticed, of beautiful design. Curtains, carpets, tinted walls, formed a harmony of soft colouring, and there were scattered here and there dainty works of art ; statuettes from Italy, and wonderful Indian ivory and silver work. A row of low, stone-ribbed windows pierced the front of the room, and, looking out, he saw the trim garden lying in the warm evening light. Immediately beneath the windows ran a broad gravelled terrace, which was apparently raked smooth every day, with a row of urns, in which hyacinths bloomed, upon its pillared wall. From the middle of it a wide stairway led down to the wonderful velvet lawn, which was dotted with clumps of cypress, and beyond that clipped yews rose smooth and solid as a rampart of stone.

It all impressed him—the order and beauty of it, the signs of loving care. It gave him a key, he fancied, to

the lives the cultured English led, for there was no sign of strain and fret and stress and hurry here. Everything went smoothly, with rhythmic regularity, and though a good many Englishmen would have regarded Garside Scar as a very second-rate country house, and seen in Major Radcliffe and his wife a somewhat prosy soldier and a withered lady, old-fashioned in her dress and views, this Westerner had what was, perhaps, a clearer vision. He could imagine the Major standing fast at any cost upon some minute point of honour, and it seemed to him that his lady might have stepped down from some picture with all the graces of an earlier age and the smell of the English lavender upon her garments. Then he remembered that Englishwomen lived somewhat coarsely in the Georgian days, and that he had met hard-handed men, grimed with dust and sweat, who could also stand fast by a point of honour, in Western Canada. Though the latter fact did not occur to him, he had, for that matter, done it more than once himself.

Then he recalled his wandering thoughts as his hostess smiled at him.

"You are interested in what you see?" she asked frankly.

"Yes, madam," said Wyllard—and the word rose instinctively to his lips, for it struck him as the only fitting way to address her. "In fact, I'd like to spend some time here and look at everything. I'd begin at the pictures and work right round."

His companion's expression implied that she was not displeased.

"But you have been in London?"

"I have," said Wyllard. "I had one or two letters to folks there from big flour shippers, and they did all they could to entertain me. But their places were different; they hadn't the—charm of yours. It's something which I think could only exist in these still

valleys and in cathedral closes. It strikes me more because it is something I've never been accustomed to."

The lady was interested, and fancied that she partly understood his attitude.

"Your life is necessarily different from ours," she suggested.

Wyllard smiled. "It's so different that you couldn't realize it. It's all strain and effort, from early sunrise until after dusk at night—bodily strain of aching muscles, and mental stress in adverse seasons. We scarcely think of comfort, and never dream of artistic luxury. The dollars we raise are sunk again in seed and extra teams and ploughs."

"A good many people are driven hard by the love of money here."

"No," said Wyllard gravely, "that's not it exactly—at least, not with most of us. It's rather the pride of wresting another quarter-section from the prairie, taking—our own—by labour, breaking the wilderness. You"—and he added this as though to explain that he could hardly expect her to grasp his views—"have never been out West?"

His hostess laughed. "I have stayed down in the plains through the hot season in stifling cantonments, and I have once or twice been in Indian cholera camps. Besides, I have seen my husband, haggard and worn with fever, sitting in his saddle holding back a clamorous crowd that surged about him half-mad with religious fury. There were Hindus and Moslems to be kept from flying at each other's throats, and at a tactless word or sign of wavering either party would have pulled him down."

"You'll have to forgive me, madam"—and Wyllard's manner was deprecatory, though his eyes twinkled. "The notion that we're the only ones who really work, or, at least, do anything worth while, is a favourite one out West. No doubt it's a delusion. I

should have known that all of us are born like that."

His hostess forgave him readily, if only for the "all of us," which she thought especially fortunate. A few minutes later there were voices in the hall, and then the door opened, and the girl he had met at the stepping-stones came in. She was dressed differently—in trailing garments which, it seemed to him, became her wonderfully, and he noticed now the shapely delicacy of her hands and the fine ivory pallor of her skin. Then his hostess turned to him.

"I had better present you formally to Miss Ismay," she said. "Agatha, this is Mr. Wyllard, who, I understand, has brought you a message from Canada."

There was no doubt that Wyllard was blankly astonished, and for a moment the girl was clearly startled, too.

"You!" was all she said.

She, however, held her hand out before she turned to speak to Mrs. Radcliffe, but it was a relief to both when somebody announced that dinner was ready.

Wyllard sat next to his hostess, and was not sorry that he was only called upon to take part in casual general conversation, though he fancied once or twice that Miss Ismay was unobtrusively studying him. It was also nearly an hour after the meal was over when Mrs. Radcliffe left them alone in the drawing-room.

"You have, no doubt, much to talk about, and you needn't join us until you're ready," she said. "The Major always reads the London papers after dinner."

Agatha sat down in a low chair near the hearth, and it first of all occurred to Wyllard, who took a place opposite her, that she was, although of full stature, too delicate and refined, too highly-cultivated, in fact, to marry Hawtrey. This was strange, since he had hitherto regarded his comrade as a typical well-educated Englishman; but it now struck him that there was a certain streak of coarseness in Gregory.

The man, it suddenly flashed upon him, was self-indulgent, and his careless ease of manner, which he had once liked, was too much in evidence. In a few moments, however, Agatha turned to him.

"I understand that Gregory is recovering rapidly?" she said.

Wyllard assured her that this was the case, and Agatha said quietly: "He wants me to go out to him."

Wyllard felt that if a girl of this kind had promised to marry *him*, he would not have sent for her, but have come in person, if he had been compelled to pledge his last possessions, or crawl to the steamer on his hands and knees. For all that, he was ready to defend his friend.

"I'm afraid it's necessary," he said. "Gregory was unfit for such a journey when I left, and he must be ready to commence the season's campaign with the first of the spring. Our summer is short, you see, and with our one-crop farming it's indispensable to get the seed in early: in fact, he will be badly behind as it is."

This was not particularly tactful, since, without intending it, he made it evident that his comrade had been to some extent remiss; but Agatha smiled.

"Oh," she said, "I understand. You needn't labour the excuse. But hadn't you the same difficulty in getting away?"

"I couldn't have done so at one time, but it's easier now. My holding's larger than Gregory's, and I have a foreman who can look after it for me."

"Gregory said that you were a great friend of his."

Wyllard seized this opportunity. "He is a great friend of mine, and I like to think it means the same thing. In fact, it's reasonably certain that he saved my life for me."

"Ah!" said Agatha, "that is a thing he didn't mention. How did it come about?"

Wyllard was glad to tell the story ; he was anxious to say all he honestly could in Hawtrey's favour.

" We were at work on a railroad trestle—a towering wooden bridge in British Columbia. It stretched across a deep ravine with great boulders and a stream in the bottom of it, and we stood high up on a staging close beneath the metals. A fast freight, a huge general produce train, came down the track, with one of the new big locomotives hauling it, and when the cars went banging by above us, we could hardly hold on to the bridge. Still, the construction foreman was a hustler, and we had to get the spikes in. I was swinging the hammer when I felt the plank beneath me slip. The train had, no doubt, jarred the bolt we had our lashings round loose. For a moment I fancied I was going down into the gorge, and then Gregory leaned out and grabbed me. He had only one free hand to do it with, and when he felt my weight, one foot swung out from the stringer he had sprung to. It seemed certain that I would pull him down with me. We hung like that for a space—I don't know how long."

He paused for a moment, feeling the stress of it again, and there was a thrill in his voice when he went on.

" It was then," he said, " I knew just what kind of man Gregory Hawtrey was. Anybody else would have let me go ; but he held on. At length I got my hand on some of the framing, and he swung me on to the stringer."

He saw the appreciation in Agatha's eyes. " Oh ! " she said, " that is just what he must have done. He was like that always—impulsive, splendidly generous."

Wyllard felt that he had succeeded, though he knew there were men on the prairie who called his comrade slackly careless, instead of impulsive. Agatha, however, spoke again.

"But Gregory wasn't a carpenter," she said.

"In those days, when dollars were scanty, we had to be whatever we could. There wasn't much specialization of handicrafts out there then. The farmer whose crop was ruined took up the railroad shovel, or borrowed a saw from somebody and set about building houses, or anything else that was wanted."

"Of course!" said Agatha. "Besides, he was always wonderfully quick. He could learn any game by just watching it awhile. He did all he undertook brilliantly."

Wyllard reflected that Gregory had, at least, made no great success of farming; but that occupation, as practised on the prairie, demands more than quickness and what some call brilliancy from the man who undertakes it. He must possess the capacity for staying with it—the grim courage to hold tighter under each crushing blow, when his teams die, or the grain shrivels under the harvest frost, or ragged ice hurtling before a roaring blast does the reaping. It was, however, evident that this girl had an unquestioning faith in Gregory Hawtreys, and once more Wyllard felt compassionate towards her. He wondered if she would have retained it had the man spent those four years in England instead of Canada, for it was clear from the contrast between her and her picture that she had grown in many ways since she had given her promise to her lover. He had said what he could in Hawtreys's favour, but now he felt that something was due to the girl.

"Gregory told me to explain what things are like out there," he said. "I think it is because they are so different from what you are accustomed to that he has waited as long as he has done. He wanted to make them as easy as possible for you, and now he would like you to realize what is before you."

He was almost astonished at the girl's comprehen-

sion, for she glanced round the luxurious room with a smile.

"You look on me as part of—this? I mean, it seems to you that I fit in with my surroundings, and would only be in harmony with them?"

"Yes," said Wyllard gravely, "I think you fit in with them excellently."

Agatha laughed. "Well," she said, "I was once accustomed to something similar, though, after all, one could hardly compare the Grange with Garside Scar. Still, that was some time ago, and I have earned my living for several years now. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

She glanced down at her dress. "For instance, this is the result of a good deal of self-denial, though the cost of it was partly worked off in music lessons, and the stuff was almost the cheapest I could get. I sang at concerts, and it was part of my stock-in-trade. But why should you think me only capable of living in luxury?"

"I didn't go that far."

She laughed again. "Then is Canada such a very dreadful place? I have heard of other Englishwomen going out there as farmers' wives. Do they all live unhappily?"

"No," said Wyllard—"at least, they show no sign of it, and some of them and the city-born Canadians are, I think, the salt of this earth. Probably it's easy to be calm and gracious in such a place as this—though I naturally don't know, since I've never tried it—but when a woman who toils from sunrise to sunset most of the year keeps her sweetness and serenity, it's a very different and much finer thing. But I'll try to answer the other question. The prairie isn't dreadful; it's a land of sunshine and clear skies. Heat and cold—and we have them both—don't worry one there. There's optimism in the crystal air. It's not beautiful

like these valleys, but it has its beauty. It's vast and silent, and though our homesteads are crude and new, once you pass the breaking, it's primevally old. That gets hold of one, somehow. It's wonderful after sunset in the early spring, when the cold wind's like wine, and it runs white to the horizon with the smoky red on the rim of it melting into transcendental green. When the wheat rolls across the foreground in ochre and burnished-copper waves, it's more wonderful still. One sees the fulfilment of the promise, and takes courage."

"Then," said Agatha, who had scarcely suspected him of a capacity for such flights as this, "what is there to shrink from?"

"In the case of a small farmer's wife, the constant, never-slackening strain. There's no hired assistance; she must clean the house, and wash, and cook, though it's not unusual for the men to wash the plates."

The girl was evidently not much impressed, for she laughed.

"Does Gregory wash the plates?" she asked.

Wyllard's eyes twinkled. "When Sproatly won't," he answered. But, in a general way, they only do it once a week."

"Ah," said Agatha, "I can imagine Gregory hating it. As a matter of fact, I like him for it."

"Then she must bake, and mend her husband's clothes. Indeed, it's not unusual for her to mend for the hired man, too. Besides that, there are always odds and ends of tasks, but the time when you feel the strain most is in the winter. Then you sit at night, shivering, as a rule, beside the stove in an almost empty log-walled room, reading a book you have probably read three or four times before. Outside, the frost is Arctic; you can hear the roofing shingles crackle now and then—and you wake up when the fire burns low. There's no life, no company, rarely a new face, and if

you go to a dance or supper somewhere, perhaps once a month, you ride back on a bobsled frozen almost stiff beneath the robes."

"Still," said Agatha, "that does not last."

The man understood her. "Oh!" he said, "one makes progress—that is, if one can stand the strain—but as the one way of doing it is to sow for a larger harvest, and break fresh sod every year, there can be no slackening down in the meanwhile. Every dollar must be guarded and ploughed into the soil again."

He broke off, feeling that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, and Agatha asked one question.

"A woman who didn't slacken could make the struggle easier for the man?"

"Yes," said Wyllard simply, "in every way. But she would have a great deal to bear."

Agatha's face softened. "Ah," she said, "she would not grudge the effort in the case of one she loved."

Then she looked up again with a smile. "I wonder," she added, "if you really thought I should flinch."

"When I first heard of it, I thought it quite likely. Then, when I read your letter, my doubts vanished."

He saw he had not been judicious, for there was, for the first time, a trace of hardness in the girl's expression.

"He showed you that?" she asked.

"One small part of it," said Wyllard. "I want to say that when I saw this house, and how you seemed fitted to it, my misgivings about Gregory's decision troubled me once more. Now they have vanished altogether, and they'll never come back again."

He spoke as he felt. This girl, he fancied, would feel the strain, but she had strength enough to bear it cheerfully. In spite of her refinement, she was one

who could be depended on in time of stress. He often remembered afterwards how they had sat together in the luxuriously furnished room, she leaning back, with the soft light on her delicately tinted face, in her big low chair. In the meanwhile she said nothing, and by and by he looked up at her.

"It's curious that I had your photograph ever so long, and never thought of showing it to Gregory," he said.

Agatha smiled. "I suppose it is," she agreed. "Still, except that it might have been a relief to Major Radcliffe if he had met you sooner, the fact that you didn't show it to Gregory doesn't seem of any particular consequence."

Wyllard was not sure of this. He had thought about this girl often, and had been conscious of a thrill of satisfaction when he had met her at the stepping-stones a few days earlier. That feeling had also suddenly disappeared when he had learned that she was his comrade's promised wife. He had, however, during the last hour or two made up his mind to think no more of her.

"Well," he said, "the next thing is to arrange for Mrs. Hastings to meet you in London, or, perhaps, at the Grange. Her husband is a Canadian, a man of education, who has a large homestead not far from Gregory's. Her folks are people of station in Montreal, and I feel sure you'll like her."

They decided that he was to ask Mrs. Hastings to stay a few days at the Grange, and then he looked at the girl somewhat diffidently.

"She thinks of going in a fortnight," he said.

Agatha smiled at him. "Then," she said, "I must not keep her waiting."

She rose, and they went back together to join their hostess.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAVELLING COMPANION

A GREY haze, thickened by the smoke of the city, drove out across the water when the *Scarrowmania* lay in the Mersey, with her cable hove short, and the last of the flood-tide gurgling against her bows. A trumpeting blast of steam swept aloft from beside her squat funnel, and the splash of the slowly turning paddles of the couple of steam-tugs that lay alongside mingled with the din it made. A gangway from one of them led to the *Scarrowmania's* forward deck, and a stream of frowsy humanity that had just been released from overpacked emigrant boarding-houses poured up it. There were representatives of all peoples and languages among that unkempt horde—Britons, Scandinavians, Teutons, Italians, Russians, Poles—and they moved on in forlorn apathy, like cattle driven to the slaughter. One wondered, from the look of them, how they had raised their passage money, and how many years' bitter self-denial it had cost them to provide for their transit to the land of promise.

At the head of the gangway stood the steamboat doctors, for the *Scarrowmania* was taking out an unusual number of passengers, and there were two of them. They were immaculate in blue uniform, and looked very clean and English by contrast with the mass of unwashed aliens. Beside them stood another official, presumably acting on behalf of the Dominion Government, though there were few restrictions imposed upon Canadian immigration then, nor, for that matter, did anybody trouble much about the comfort of the steerage passengers. Though they have altered all that since, each steamer, in a general way, carried as many as she could hold.

As the stream poured out of the gangway, the

doctor glanced at each new-comer's face, and then, seizing him by the wrist, uncovered it. Since this took him two or three seconds, one could have fancied that he either possessed peculiar powers, or that the test was a somewhat inefficient one. Then he looked at the official, who made a sign, and the passenger moved on.

In the meanwhile a group of first-class passengers, leaning on the thwart-ship rails close by, looked on, some with complacent satisfaction that they were born in a different station, others with half-contemptuous pity. Among them stood Mrs. Hastings, Miss Winifred Rawlinson, and Agatha. The latter noticed that Wyllard sat on a hatch forward near the head of the gangway, with a pipe in his hand. She drew Mrs. Hastings' attention to it.

"Whatever is Mr. Wyllard doing there?" she asked.

Her companion, who was wrapped in furs, for there was a sting in the east wind, smiled at her.

"That," she said, "is more than I can tell you. But Harry Wyllard seems to find an interest in what most folks would consider unpromising things, and, what's more to the purpose, he's rather addicted to taking a hand in. It's a habit that costs him something now and then."

Agatha asked nothing further. She was interested in Wyllard, but she was at the moment more interested in the faces of those who swarmed on board. She wondered what they had endured in the lands that had cast them out, and what they might still have to bear. She imagined that the murmur of their harsh voices went up in a great protest, an inarticulate cry of sorrow. While she looked on, the doctor held back a long-haired man, who was following a haggard woman shuffling in broken boots. He drew him aside, and when, after he had consulted with the other official, two seamen hustled the man towards a second gang-

way that led to the tug, the woman raised a wild despairing cry. She blocked the passage, however, and a quartermaster drove her, expostulating in an agony of terror, forward among the rest. Nobody appeared concerned about this alien's tragedy, except one man, but Agatha was not astonished when Wyllard rose and quietly laid his hand upon the official's shoulder.

A parley followed, somebody gave an order, and when the alien was led back again, the woman's cries subsided. Agatha looked at her companion, and once more a smile crept into Mrs. Hastings' eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I guessed he would feel he had to stand in. That's a man who can't see anyone in trouble." Then she added, with a sigh. "He had a bonanza harvest last fall, anyway."

They moved aft soon afterwards, and the *Scarrow-mania* was smoothly gliding seawards with the first of the ebb when Agatha met Wyllard. He glanced at the Lancashire sand-hills, which were fading into a pale ochre gleam amidst the haze over the starboard hand, and then at the long row of painted buoys that moved back to them ahead.

"You're off at last! The sad grey weather is dropping fast astern," he said. "Out yonder, the skies are clear."

"Thank you," said Agatha, "I'm to apply that as I like? As a matter of fact, however, our days aren't always grey. But what was the trouble when those passengers came on board?"

Wyllard's manner, as she noticed, was free alike from the self-satisfaction which occasionally characterizes the philanthropist and from any affectation of diffidence.

"Well," he answered, "there was something wrong with that woman's husband—nothing infectious, I believe, but they didn't seem to consider him a desirable citizen. They make a warning ex-

ample of somebody with a physical infirmity now and then. The man, they decided, must be put ashore again. In the meanwhile, somebody else had hustled the woman forward, and it looked as if they'd have taken her on without him. The tug was almost ready to cast off."

"How dreadful!" said Agatha. "But what did you do?"

"Merely promised to guarantee the cost of his passage back if they'd refer his case to the immigration people at the other end. It's scarcely likely that they'll make trouble. As a rule, they only throw folks who are certain to become a charge on the community."

"But if he really had any infirmity, mightn't it lead to that?"

"No," said Wyllard dryly. "I would engage to give him a fair start if it was necessary. You wouldn't have had that woman landed in Montreal, helpless and alone, while the man was sent back again to starve in Poland?"

He saw a curious liquid gleam in Agatha's eyes, and added in a hesitating manner, "You see, I've now and then limped without a dollar into a British Columbian mining town."

The girl was moved; but there was another matter that must be mentioned, though she felt that the time was somewhat inopportune.

"Miss Rawlinson, who had only a second-class ticket, insists upon being told how it is that she has been transferred to the saloon."

Wyllard's eyes twinkled, but she noticed that he was wholly free from embarrassment, which was not quite the case with her.

"Well," he said, "that's a matter I must leave you to handle. Anyway, she can't go second-class now. One or two of the steerage exchanged when they saw

their quarters, for which I don't blame them, and they've filled every room right up."

"You haven't answered the question."

Wyllard waved his hand. "Miss Rawlinson is your bridesmaid, and I'm Gregory's best man. It's my business to do everything as he'd like it done."

He left her a moment later, and though she did not know how she was to explain the matter to Miss Rawlinson, who was of an independent disposition, she thought he had found a rather graceful way out of the difficulty. The more she saw of this Western farmer, the more she liked him.

It was after dinner when she next met him, and—for the wind had changed—the *Scarrowmania* was steaming head-on into a glorious north-west breeze. The shrouds sang, and chain-guy, stanchion, and whatever caught the wind, set up a deep-toned throbbing, and ranks of little white-topped seas rolled out of the night ahead. A half-moon hung low above them, blurred now and then by wisps of flying cloud, and odd spouts of spray that gleamed in the silvery light leapt up about the dipping bows. Wyllard was leaning on the rails with a cigar in his hand, when Agatha stopped beside him, and she glanced towards the lighted windows of the smoke-room.

"How is it you are not in there?" she asked, for something to say.

"I was," said Wyllard. "It's full up, and they didn't want me. They're busy playing cards, and the stakes are pretty high. A steamboat's smoke-room is less of a men's lounge than a gambling club."

"And you object to cards?"

"Oh, no!" said Wyllard. "They merely make me tired, and when I feel I want some excitement for my dollars, I get it another way. That one seems tame to me."

"Which is the one you like?"

The man laughed. "There are a good many that appeal to me. Once it was collecting sealskins off other people's beaches, and there was zest enough in that, in view of the probability of the dory turning over, or a gunboat dropping on to you. Then there was a good deal of very genuine excitement to be got out of placer-mining in British Columbia, especially when there was frost in the ranges, and you had to thaw out your giant-powder. Shallow alluvial workings have a way of caving in when you least expect it of them. After all, however, I think I like the prairie-farming best."

"Is that exciting?"

"Yes," said Wyllard, "if you do it in one way. The gold's there—that you're sure of—piled up by Nature during I don't know how many thousand years, but you have to stake high if you want to get much of it out. One needs costly labour, teams—no end of them—breakers, and big gang-ploughs. The farmer who has nerve enough drills his last dollar into the soil in spring, but, if he means to succeed, it costs him more than that. He must give the sweat of his tensest effort, the uttermost toil of his body—all, in fact, that he has. Then he must shut his eyes tight to the hazards against him, or—and we can't all do that—look at them without wavering—the drought, the hail, the harvest frost. If his teams fall sick, or the season goes against him, he must work double tides. Still, it now and then happens that things go right, and the red wheat rolls ripe right back across the prairie. I don't know that any man could want a keener thrill than the one you feel when you drive the binders in!"

Agatha had imagination, and she could realize something of the toil, the hazard, and the clean thrill of that victory.

"Have you felt it often?" she asked.

"Twice we helped to fill a big elevator up," said

Wyllard quietly. "Still, I've been very near defeat."

The girl looked at him thoughtfully. She fancied he possessed the power of acquisition, as well as a wide generosity, that came into play when by determined effort success had been attained, which, so far as her experience went, were things that did not invariably accompany each other.

"And when the harvest comes up to your expectations, you give your dollars away," she said.

Wyllard laughed. "You shouldn't deduce too much from a single instance. Besides, that Pole's case hasn't cost me anything yet."

Mrs. Hastings and Winifred joined them soon afterwards, and when Wyllard strolled away, they spent some time leaning on the rails, watching the groups of shadowy figures on the forward deck. Their attitude was dejected and melancholy, but one cluster had gathered round a man who stood upon the hatch.

"Yes," he said, "you'll have no trouble. Canada's a great country for a poor man. He can sleep beneath a bush all summer, if he can't strike anything he likes."

This did not appear particularly encouraging, but the orator went on. "Been over for a trip to the Old Country, and I'm glad I'm going back again. Went out there with nothing but a good discharge, and they made me sergeant of Canadian militia. After that armourer to a rifle club. There's places a blame long way behind the Dominion, and I struck one of them when we went with Roberts to Afghanistan. It was on that trip I and a Pathan rolled all down a hill, him trying to get his knife-arm loose, and me jabbing his breastbone with my bayonet before I got it into him. I drove it through to the socket. You want to make quite sure of a Pathan."

Miss Rawlinson winced at this. "Oh," she said, "what a horrible man!"

"It was 'most as tough as when you went after Riel,

and stole the Scotsman's furs," suggested a Canadian.

The sergeant let the jibe go by. "Well," he said, "Louis's bucks could shoot! We had them corralled in a pit, but every time one of the boys from Montreal broke cover, he got a bullet into him. Did any of you ever hear a dropped man squeal?"

Agatha had heard sufficient, and she and her companions turned away, but as they moved across the deck, the sergeant's voice followed her.

"Oh, yes," he said, "a grand country for a poor man. In the summer he can sleep beneath a bush."

For some reason this eulogy haunted Agatha when she retired to her room that night, and she wondered what awaited all those aliens in the new land, until it occurred to her that, in some respects, she was situated very much as they were. Then, for the first time, vague misgivings crept into her mind as she realized that she had cut herself adrift from all that she had been accustomed to. She felt suddenly depressed and lonely.

The depression had, however, almost vanished when, awakening rather early next morning, she went up on deck. A red sun hung low in the hazy east, where the tumbling seas grew dim, but they rolled up in crested phalanxes that gleamed green and incandescent while ahead. The *Scarrowmania* plunged through them with a spray cloud flying about her bows. She was a small, old-fashioned boat, and—for she had some 3,000 tons of railway iron in the bottom of her—she rolled distressfully. Her tall spars swayed athwart the vivid blueness of the morning sky, with the rhythmic regularity of a pendulum. The girl, however, was troubled by no sense of sickness—the keen north-wester that sang amidst the shrouds was wonderfully fresh—and when she met Wyllard crossing the saloon deck, her cheeks were glowing from the sting of the spray, and her eyes were bright.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Down there," said Wyllard, pointing to the black opening in the fore-hatch that led to the steerage quarters. "An acquaintance of mine who's travelling forward asked me to take a look round, and I'm rather glad I did. When I've had a word with the chief steward I'm going back again."

"You have a friend there?"

"I met the man for the first time yesterday, and rather took to him. One of your naval petty officers, forcibly retired, who can't live upon his pension, which is why he's going out to Canada. Now you'll excuse me."

"I wonder," said Agatha, "if you would let me go back with you?"

Wyllard looked at her curiously. "Well," he said, with an air of reflection, "you'll have to face a good deal that you don't like out yonder, and in one way you won't suffer from some preparatory training. This, however, is not a case where sentimental pity is likely to relieve anybody. It's the real thing."

"I think I told you at Garside Scar that I haven't lived altogether in luxury?"

Wyllard, who made no comment, disappeared, and merely signed to her when he came back. They reached the ladder that led down into the gloom beneath the hatch, and Agatha hesitated when a sour and musty odour floated up to her, apparently out of the depths of the ship. She went down, however, and a few moments later stood, half-nauseated, gazing at the wildest scene of confusion her eyes had ever rested on. A little light came down the hatchway, and a smoky lamp or two swung above her head, but half the steerage deck was wrapped in shadow, and out of it there rose a many-voiced complaining. Flimsy, unplanned fittings had wrenched away, and men lay inert amidst the wreckage, with the remains

of their last meal scattered about them. There were unwashed tin plates and pannikins, knives, and spoons, sliding up and down everywhere, and the deck was foul with slops of tea, and trodden bread, and marmalade. Now and then, in a wilder roll than usual, a frowsy, huddled object slid groaning down the slant of slimy planking, but in every case the helpless passenger was fully dressed. Steerage passengers, in fact, seldom take off their clothes. For one thing, all their worldly possessions are, as a rule, secreted among their attire, and, for another, most of those hailing from beyond the Danube have never been accustomed to disrobing. In the midst of the confusion, two half-sick steward lads were making wholly ineffective efforts to straighten up the mess.

Then Agatha made out that a swarm of urchins were huddled together, in a helpless mass, along one side of the horrible place. The sergeant was haranguing them, while another man, whom she supposed to be the petty officer, pulled them to their feet one by one. A good deal of his labour was wasted, for the *Scarrow-mania* was rolling viciously, and as soon as he had got a few upright, half of them collapsed again. Wyllard glanced towards the lads.

"I believe most of them have had nothing to eat since they came on board, though it isn't the company's fault," he said. "There's food enough served out, but before we picked the breeze up, the men laid hands upon it first, and half of it was wasted in the scramble. Then it seems they pitched these youngsters out of their berths."

"Don't they belong to anybody?" Agatha asked. "Is there no one to look after them?"

Wyllard smiled dryly. "I believe one of your charitable institutions is sending them out, and there seems to be a clergyman, who has a curate and a lay assistant to help him, in charge. The assistant won't

be available while this rolling lasts, and the other two very naturally prefer the saloon. In a way, that's comprehensible."

He left her, and proceeded to help the man who was dragging the urchins to their feet.

"Get up!" said the sergeant. "Get up and fall in. Dress from the left, and number off, the ones who can stand."

It appeared that the lads had been drilled, for they scrambled into a line that bent and wavered each time the *Scarrowmania's* bows went down. After that, every other lad stepped forward at the word; the order was: "Left turn! March and fall in on deck," and when they feebly clambered up the ladder, Wyllard, who turned to Agatha, pointed to a door in a bulk-head of rough white wood.

"It should have been locked, but I fancy you can get in that way, and up through another hatch," he said. "The single women and women with children are in yonder, and if you want to be useful, there's a field for you. Get as many as possible up on deck."

Agatha left him, and her face was white when at last she came up into the open air with about a dozen forlorn dragged women trailing helplessly after her. The lads were now sitting down in a double line on deck, each with a tin plate and a steaming pannikin in front of him. There were, she fancied, at least a hundred of them, and a man with a bronzed face and the stamp of command upon him was giving them the order of the voyage. He was the one she had already noticed.

"You'll turn out at the whistle at half-past six," he said. "Shake mattresses, roll up blankets, and prepare for berth inspection. Then, at the next whistle, you'll fall in on deck, stripped to the waist, for washing parade. Fourth files, numbering even, are orderlies in charge of the plates and pannikins."

"And," said the sergeant, "any insubordination will

be sharply dealt with. Now, when I was with Roberts in Afghanistan——”

Wyllard, who was standing close by, remarked to Agatha—

“I don't think we'll be wanted. You have probably earned your breakfast.”

They went back to the saloon deck, and the girl smiled when he looked at her inquiringly.

“It was horrible, but I hadn't so many to deal with,” she said. “Do you and those others expect to bring any order out of that chaos?”

“No,” said Wyllard. “With some encouragement, they'll do it themselves—that is, the English, Danes, and Germans. One can trust them to evolve a workable system. It's in their nature. You can trace most things that tend to wholesome efficiency back to the old Teutonic leaven. By and by, they'll proceed to put some pressure on the Latins, Slavs, and Jews.”

“But is it your business to offer them that encouragement?”

Wyllard laughed. “Strictly speaking, it isn't in the least, but unnecessary chaos is hateful, and I'm not the only one who doesn't seem to like it. There's the petty officer and our friend the sergeant, who was with Roberts in Afghanistan.”

Agatha said nothing further. She was surprised to feel that she was anxious to keep this man's good opinion, though that was not exactly why she had nerved herself for the venture into the single women's quarters. Leaving him out altogether, there was something rather fine in the way the petty officer, who was going out penniless to Canada, and the sergeant had saddled themselves with the task of looking after those helpless lads. It was a wholly unpaid labour, for which the men who preferred to remain within the safe limits of the saloon deck would presumably get the credit. There were, she decided, no doubt, men in

every station who helped to keep the world sweet and clean, and she fancied that her companion was to be counted among them. He differed in many ways from Gregory, but then Gregory was unapproachable. She did not remember that it was four years since she had seen the latter, and that her ideas had been unformed then.

During the evening, Mrs. Hastings, with whom he was a favourite, happened to speak of Wyllard and the efforts he was making in the steerage, and Agatha asked a question.

"Does he often undertake this kind of thing?"

"No," said Mrs. Hastings with a smile—"at any rate, not on so large a scale. He's very far from setting up as a professional philanthropist, my dear. I don't ever remember him offering to point out their duty to other folks, and I don't think he goes about in search of an opportunity of benefiting humanity. Still, as I suggested, when an individual case thrusts itself beneath his nose, he generally—does what he can."

"I've heard people say that the individual method only perpetuates the trouble," Agatha replied.

Her companion laughed. "That," she said, "is a subject I'm not well posted on, but if other folks only adopted Harry Wyllard's simple plan, there would be considerably less need for organized charity."

CHAPTER IX

THE FOG

DURING the next two days the *Scarrowmania* shouldered her way westwards through the big white-topped combers that rolled down upon her under a lowering sky before a moderate gale. There were no luxurious steam-propelled hotels in the Canadian trade just

then, and, loaded deep with railway metal as she was, she slopped the green seas in everywhere, and rolled her streaming sides out almost to her bilge. She also shivered and rattled horribly, when her single screw swung clear and the tri-compound engines ran away.

Wyllard went down to the steerage every now and then, and Agatha, who contrived to keep on her feet, not infrequently accompanied him. She was glad of his society, for Mrs. Hastings was seldom in evidence, and no efforts could get Miss Rawlinson out of her berth. The gale, however, blew itself out at length, and the evening after it moderated, Agatha was sitting near the head of one fiddle-guarded table in the saloon, waiting for dinner, which the stewards had still some difficulty in bringing in. Wyllard's place was next to hers, but he had not appeared yet, nor, as it happened, had the skipper, who, however, did not invariably dine with the passengers. One of the two doors which led from the foot of the branching companion stairway into either side of the saloon stood open, and presently she saw Wyllard standing just outside it.

He beckoned to the doctor, who sat at the foot of her table, and the latter merely raised his brows a trifle. He was a consequential person, and it was evident to the girl that he resented being summoned by a gesture. She did not think anybody else had noticed Wyllard, and she waited with some curiosity to see what he would do. He signalled with a lifted hand, and she felt that the other would obey, as, in fact, he did, though his manner was far from conciliatory. By dint of listening closely, she could hear their conversation.

"I'm sorry," said Wyllard, "to trouble you just now, and I didn't come in, because that would have set everybody wondering what you were wanted for; but one of those boys forward has been thrown down the ladder, and has cut his head."

"Ah!" said the doctor. "I'll see to him—after dinner."

"It's a nasty cut," persisted Wyllard. "He's losing a good deal of blood."

"Then I would suggest that you apply to my assistant."

"As I don't know where he is, I have come to you."

The doctor made a sign of impatience. "Well," he said, "you have told me, which I think is as far as your concern in the matter goes. I may add that I'm not accustomed to dictation on behalf of a steerage passenger."

Agatha saw Wyllard quietly slip between him and the entrance to the saloon, but she also saw, as neither of the others were in a position to do, the skipper appear a few paces behind them, and glance at them sharply. He was usually a silent man, at home among the ice and in the clammy fog, but not a great acquisition in the saloon.

"Something wrong down forward, Mr. Wyllard? They were making a great row a little while ago," he said.

"Nothing very serious," answered Wyllard. "One of the boys, however, has cut his head."

The skipper turned towards the doctor quietly, but Agatha fancied he had overheard part of the conversation.

"Don't you think you had better go—at once?" he suggested.

The doctor evidently did, for he disappeared, and Wyllard, who entered the saloon with the skipper, sat down at Agatha's side.

"How do you do it?" she asked.

"What?" asked Wyllard, attacking his dinner.

"We'll say persuade other folks to see things as you do."

"You evidently mean the skipper, and I suppose you

heard something of what was going on. In this case, as it happens, I'm indebted to his prejudices. He's one of the old type—a seaman first of all—and what we call bluff, and you call bounce, has only one effect upon men like him. It gets their backs up."

Agatha fancied that he did not like it, either, but she changed the subject.

"There really was a row forward," she said. "What was the trouble over? You were, no doubt, somewhere near the scene of it."

Wyllard laughed. "I sat upon the steerage ladder, and am afraid I cheered the combatants on. It was really a glorious row. They hammered each other with tin plates, and some of them tried to use hoop-iron knives, which fortunately doubled up. They broke quite a few of the benches, and wrecked the mess-table, but, so far as I noticed, the only one seriously hurt was a little chap who was quietly looking on."

"And you encouraged them?"

"I certainly did. It was a protest against dirt, disorder, and the slothfulness that's a plague to the community. Isn't physical force warranted when there's no other cure?"

A grey-haired Canadian looked up.

"Yes," he said, "I guess it is. The first man who pulled his gun in British Columbia was hanged right away, and they've scarcely had to make an example of another ever since, though it's quite a while ago."

He paused and smiled approvingly. "A mess of any kind worries us, and we don't take long to straighten it out. Same feelings in the Germans and Scandinavians. I'll say that for them, anyway. Your friends swept up the steerage, Mr. Wyllard?"

"They took the Slavs and Jews, and pitched them down the second hatch on to the orlop deck. Things will go smoothly now our crowd are on top."

"Your crowd?" said Agatha.

The Canadian nodded. "That's what he meant," he said. "There are two kinds of folks you and the rest of them are dumping into Canada. One's the kind that will get up and hustle, break land, and build new homes—log at first, frame and stone afterwards. They go on from a quarter-section and a team of oxen to the biggest farm they can handle, and every fresh furrow they cut enriches all of us. The other kind want to sit down in the dirt and take life easily, as they've always done. The dirt worries everybody else, and we've no use for them. By and by our Legislature will have to wake up and stop them getting in."

He went on with his dinner after this, but his observations left Agatha thoughtful. She was, for one thing, beginning to understand one side of her companion's character. He, it seemed, stood for practical efficiency. There was a driving force in him that made for progress and order. It was his mission to straighten things out. Some folks of his kind, she reflected, now and then made a good deal of avoidable trouble; but there was in this man, at least, a half-whimsical toleration which rendered that an unlikely thing in his particular case. Besides, she had already recognized that she was in some respects fortunate in having such a man for her companion.

Her deck chair was always set out in the most sheltered and comfortable place. If there was anything to be seen—a cargo boat plunging along, fore-castle under, or a great iron sailing ship thrashing out to the westwards, with the spray clouds flying about her hove-up weather side—he almost invariably appeared with a pair of powerful glasses. She was watched over, her wishes anticipated, and the man was seldom obtrusively present when she

felt disposed to talk to somebody else. It struck her that she had thought a good deal about him during the last few days, and less about Gregory, which was partly why she did not walk up and down the deck with him, as usual, after dinner that evening.

Three or four days later the *Scarrowmania* ran into the Bank fog, and burrowed through it with whistle hooting dolefully at regular intervals. Now and then an answering ringing of bells came out of the vapour, and the half-seen shape of an anchored schooner loomed up, rolling wildly on grey slopes of sea. Once, too, a tiny dory, half-filled with lines and buoys, slid by, plunging on the wash flung off by the *Scarrowmania's* bows, and Agatha understood that the men in her had escaped death by a hair's-breadth. They were cod-fishers, Wyllard told her, and he added that there was a host of them at work somewhere in the haze. She, however, fancied, now and then, that the fog had a depressing effect on him, and that, when the dory lay beneath the rail, there had been an unusual look in his face.

Then a breeze came out of the north-west, with the sting of the ice in it, but the fog did not lift, and the *Scarrowmania* plunged on through it with spray-wet decks and the grey seas smashing about her bows. It was bitterly cold and clammy, the raw wind pierced to the bone, but the voyage was, at least, rapidly shortening, and one evening Agatha paced the deck with Wyllard in a somewhat curious mood. Perhaps it was merely the gloom reacting upon her, for she was looking forward to the landing with a certain half-conscious shrinking.

They stopped by the rails presently, looking out upon a narrow stretch of dim seas that came up out of the mist tipped with livid froth, and the dreary scene intensified the girl's depression. There was something unpleasantly suggestive in the sight of

the fog that hid everything, for she had of late been troubled with a half-apprehensive longing to see what lay before her. In the meanwhile, she noticed the look-out standing, a lonely shapeless figure, amidst the spray that whirled about the plunging bows. By and by she saw him turn and wave an arm, apparently towards the bridge behind her, and she heard a hoarse wind-cut cry. What it meant she could not tell, but in another moment the *Scarrow-mania's* whistle shrieked again.

Then a grey shape burst out of the vapour, and grew with astonishing swiftness into dim tiers of slanted sailcloth swaying above a strip of hull that moved amidst a broad white smear of foam. It was a brig under fore-course and topsails, and, as Agatha watched her, she sank to her tilted bowsprit, and a big grey-and-white sea foamed about her bows.

"Aren't we dangerously near?" she asked.

Wyllard did not answer. He was gazing up at the bridge, and once more the whistle hurled out a great warning blast. It hardly seemed to her that the two vessels could pass clear of each other. Then Wyllard laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"The skipper's starboarding. We'll go round her stern," he said.

His grasp was reassuring, and she watched the straining curves of canvas and line of half-submerged hull. It rose with streaming bows swung high above the sea, sank again, and vanished with bewildering suddenness into a belt of driving fog. She was not sure that there had been any peril, but it was certainly over now, and she was puzzled by her sensations when Wyllard had held her shoulder. For one thing, she had felt instinctively, that she was safe with him. She, however, decided not to trouble herself about the reason for this, and by and by she

looked up at him. The expression she had already noticed was once more in his face.

"I don't think you like the fog any more than I do," she remarked.

"No," said Wyllard, with a quiet forcefulness that startled her, "I hate it."

"Why do you go as far as that?"

"It recalls something that still gives me a very bad few minutes every now and then. It has been worrying me again to-night."

"I wonder," said Agatha simply, "if you would care to tell me?"

The man looked down on her with a wry smile. "I haven't told it often, but you shall hear," he said. "It's a tale of a black failure." He stretched out a hand and pointed to the slimy fog and ranks of tumbling seas. "It was very much this kind of night, and we were lying, reefed down, off one of the Russians' beaches, when I asked for volunteers. I got them—two boats' crews of the finest seamen that ever handled oar or sealing rifle."

"But what did you want them for?"

"A boat from another schooner had been cast ashore. It was blowing very hard, as it usually does where the Polar ice comes down into the Bering Sea. They'd been shooting seals from her. We meant to bring the men off if we could manage it."

"Wouldn't one boat have been enough?"

"No," said Wyllard dryly, "we had three, and I think that was one cause of the trouble. There was one from the other schooner. You see, those seals belonged to the Russians, and we freelances could only shoot them clear off-shore. I'm not sure that the men in the wrecked boat had been fishing outside the limit."

Agatha did not press for further particulars, and he went on:

"We managed to make a landing, though one boat went up bottom uppermost," he said. "I fancy they must have broken or lost an oar then. We also got the wrecked men, but we had trouble while we were launching the boats off again. The surf was running in savagely, and the fog shut down solid as a wall. Anyway, we pulled off, and went out with a foot of water on board, while one of the rescued men took my oar when I had to let it go."

"Why had you to let it go?"

Wyllard laughed in a grim fashion.

"I got my head laid open with a sealing club," he said. "Some of the rest had their scratches, but they managed to row. For one thing, they knew they had to. They had reasons for not wanting to fall into the Russians' hands. Well, we cleared the beach, and once or twice, as I tried to bail, there was a shout somewhere near us, and the loom of a vanishing boat. It was all we could make out, for the sea was slopping into her, and the spray was flying everywhere. If there had only been two boats, we'd probably have found out our misfortune, and perhaps have set it straight. As it was, we couldn't tell it was the same boat that had hailed us."

He broke off for a moment, and then added quietly: "Two boats reached the schooners. There was a nasty sea running then, and it blew viciously hard next day. There were three men in the other."

"Ah," said Agatha, "they were drowned?"

"I'm not sure. That's the trouble. But the boat was nowhere on the beach next day, and it's difficult to see how they could have faced the sea that piled up when the gale came down. In all probability, they had an oar short, and she rolled them out when a comber broke upon her in the darkness."

The girl saw him close one hand tight as he added :
“ If one only knew ! ”

“ What would have befallen them if they'd got ashore ? ”

“ It's difficult to say. In a general way, they'd have been handed over to the Russian authorities. Still, sealers poaching up there have simply disappeared.”

He stopped again, and glanced at the gathering darkness. “ Now,” he broke out, “ you see why I hate the fog.”

“ But you couldn't help it,” said Agatha.

“ Well,” said Wyllard, “ I asked for volunteers, and the money that's now mine came out of those vessels. It's possible those men may be living still—somewhere in Northern Asia. I only know they disappeared.”

Then he abruptly commenced to talk of something else, and by and by Agatha went down to the saloon, where Miss Rawlinson, who had not been much in evidence during the voyage, presently made her appearance.

“ Aren't you going into the music-room to play for Mr. Wyllard—as usual ? ” she inquired.

Agatha was disconcerted. She had fallen into the habit of spending half an hour or longer in the music-room every evening, with Wyllard standing near the piano ; but now her companion's question seemed to place a significance upon the fact.

“ No,” she said, “ I don't think I am.”

“ Then the rest will wonder if you have fallen out with him.”

“ Fallen out with him ? ”

Winifred laughed. “ They've naturally been watching both of you, and there's only one decision they could have arrived at.”

Agatha coloured, but her companion went on :

"I don't mind admitting that, if a man of that kind was to fall in love with me, I'd black his boots for him," she said. Then she added, with a rueful gesture: "Still, it's most unlikely."

Agatha looked at her with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

"He is merely Gregory's deputy," she said, with a subconscious feeling that the epithet was not a remarkably fortunate one. "In that connexion, I should like to point out that you can estimate a man's character by that of his friends."

"Oh," said Winifred, "then if Mr. Wyllard's strong points are merely to heighten Gregory's credit, I've nothing more to say. Anyway, I'll reserve my homage until I've seen him. Perfection among men is scarce nowadays."

She turned away, and left Agatha thoughtful. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Hastings came upon Wyllard in the music-room. There was nobody else in it.

"You look serious," she said.

"I've been thinking about Miss Ismay and Gregory," said Wyllard. "In fact, I feel anxious about them."

"In which way?"

"Without making any reflections upon Gregory, I somehow feel sorry for the girl."

Mrs. Hastings nodded. "As a matter of fact, that's very much what I felt from the first," she said. "Still, you see, there's the important fact that she's fond of him, and it should smooth out a good many difficulties. Anyway, what we may call the material ones won't count. She's evidently a courageous person."

The man sat silent a moment or two. "I wasn't troubling about the latter," he replied. "I was wondering if she really could be fond of him. It's some years since she was much in his company."

"Hawtreys is not a man to change."

"That," said Wyllard, "is why I am anxious. I've no doubt he's much the same, but one could fancy that Miss Ismay has changed in many ways since she last saw him. She'll probably look for considerably more than she was content with then."

"In any case, it isn't your affair."

"In one sense it isn't; but I can't help feeling troubled about the thing. You see, Gregory is an old friend."

"And the girl is going out to marry him," Mrs. Hastings rejoined significantly.

Wyllard rose. "That," he said, "is quite uncalled for. I would like to assure you of it."

He went out, and the lady sat still in a reflective mood.

"If she begins to compare him with Hawtreys, there can be only one result," she thought.

The fog had gone next morning, and pale sunshine streamed down upon a froth-flecked sea. A bitter wind still came out of the hazy north, and the *Scarrow-mania's* plates were crusted with ice where the highest crests of the tumbling seas reached them. The spray also froze, and the decks grew slippery, until, when darkness fell, nobody but the seamen faced the stinging cold. Agatha felt the engines stop late that night, and when she went out next morning, the decks were white, and she could see dim ghosts of sliding pines through a haze of falling snow. It grew bewilderingly thick at times, but the steamer went on through it with whistle hooting, and when at last, towards sunset, the snow cleared away, Agatha stood shivering under a deck-house, looking about her with a heavy heart.

A grey haze stretched across the great river, which was also dim and grey, and odd wisps of pines rose raggedly beneath the white hills that cut against a

gloomy, lowering sky. Deck-house, boat, and stanchion dripped, and every now and then the silence was broken by a doleful blast of the whistle. Nothing moved on the still grey water ; there was no sign of life ashore ; and they seemed to be steaming into a great desolation.

By and by, Wyllard appeared from somewhere, and after a glance at her face, slipped his hand beneath her arm, and led her down to the lighted saloon. Then her heart grew a little lighter. Once more she was conscious of an unreasoning feeling that she was safe with him.

CHAPTER X

DISILLUSION

THE long train was speeding smoothly across the vast white levels of Assiniboia, when Agatha, who sat by a window, looked up as the conductor strode through the car. Mrs. Hastings asked him a question, and he stopped a moment.

"Yes," he said, "we'll be in Clermont inside half an hour."

Then he went on, and Mrs. Hastings smiled at Agatha.

"We're a little late, and Gregory will be waiting for us in the *depôt* now," she said. "No doubt he's got the wagon fixed up right, but I'd like to feel sure of it. There's a long drive before us, and I want to reach the homestead while it's daylight."

Agatha said nothing, but a faint tinge of colour crept into her cheeks, and her companion was glad to see it, for she had noticed that the girl was looking pale and haggard. This was partly due to the fact that the strain of the last few months she had spent in England was beginning to tell on her. She had borne it courageously, but a reaction had afterwards

set in, and, as it happened, the *Scarrowmania* had plunged along bows under against fresh north-westerly gales most of the way across the Atlantic. There is very little comfort on board a small, deeply-loaded steamer when she rolls her rails in, and lurches with thudding screw swung clear over big, steep-sided combers. In addition to this, Agatha had scarcely slept during the few days and nights she had spent on board the train. It takes some time to become accustomed to the atmosphere of a stove-heated sleeping-car, and since she had landed, she had been in a state of not altogether unnatural nervous tension.

Indeed, she had found it difficult to preserve an outward serenity the previous day, and when at length the great train ran into the *dépôt* at Winnipeg, where Gregory had arranged to meet them, it was with a thrill of expectancy and relief that she stood upon the car platform. There was, however, no sign of him, and though Wyllard handed her a telegram from him a few minutes later, the fact that he had not arrived had a depressing effect on her. Quiet as she usually was, the girl was highly strung. It appeared that something had gone wrong with Gregory's wagon while he was driving in to the railroad, and, as the result of it, he had missed the Atlantic train. She could not blame him for this, but, for all that, his absence had been an unpleasant shock.

Feeling that her companion's eyes were upon her, she turned, and, looking out of the window, found no encouragement in what she saw. The snow had gone, and a vast expanse of grass ran back to the horizon; but it was a dingy greyish-white, and not green as it had been in England. The sky was low and grey, too, and the only thing that broke the dreary monotony of lifeless colour was when the formless, darker smear of a birch bluff rose out of the empty levels. Her heart throbbed unpleasantly

fast as the few remaining minutes slipped away, and at length she started when a dingy mass of something that looked like buildings lifted itself above the prairie.

"The Clermont elevators," said Mrs. Hastings. "We'll be in directly."

The mass separated itself into two or three tall component blocks. A huddle of wooden houses grew into shape beneath them, and a shrill whistle came ringing back above the slowing cars. Then a willow bluff, half-filled with old cans and garbage, flitted by, a big bell began tolling, and Agatha rose when Mrs. Hastings took up her furs from a seat close by. After that, she found herself standing on the platform of the car, though she did not quite know how she got there, for she was sensible only that in another moment or two she would greet the lover she had last seen four years ago.

In the meanwhile, though she scarcely noticed them, the surroundings had probably a subconscious effect on her. There was, however, little to see; only the mass of the great elevators that cut against a lowering sky, the clusters of houses, and the sea of churned-up mire between them and the track. There also appeared to be no station except a big water-tank and an unsightly shed, about which stood a group of blurred and shapeless figures. It seemed very cold, and Agatha shivered as she felt the raw wind strike through her.

Then one of the figures detached itself from the rest and grew clearer. The man wore an old skin coat spattered with flakes of mire, and his long boots were covered with clots of the same material. His cap, from which the fur had been rubbed off in patches, looked greasy; but while she noticed these things, it was his face that struck her most, and she became conscious of an astonishment which was

mixed with vague misgivings as she gazed at it, for it had subtly changed since she had last seen it. The joyous sparkle she remembered had gone out of the eyes. They were harder and bolder than they used to be. The mouth was slack—it almost looked sensual—and the man's whole personality seemed to have grown coarser. Then, as she thrust the disconcerting fancies from her, the car stopped.

In another moment Hawtreys sprang up on the platform, and she felt his arms about her. That brought the blood to her face, but she felt none of the thrill she had expected. Indeed, she was sensible of a strange shrinking from his embrace. Then, and she fancied he must have lifted her bodily down, she stood beside the track, with Mrs. Hastings, a man whose she supposed to be the latter's husband, Winifred, and Wyllard about her. Another man was also standing close by, apparently waiting until they noticed him. He was flecked with mire all over, his skin coat was very dilapidated, and Agatha fancied that his boots had never been cleaned. His hair, which had been very badly cut, straggled out from under his old fur cap.

In the meanwhile, Gregory was explaining something to Mrs. Hastings. "No," he said, "I am sorry it can't be for another week. Horribly unfortunate. It seems they've sent the Methodist on down the line, and we'll have to wait for the Episcopalian. He'll be at Lander's for a few days."

Then Agatha's cheeks flamed, as she recognized that it was her wedding they were speaking of; but it brought her a curious relief to hear that it had been deferred. A moment or two later Gregory turned to her with questions about her throat, and his people in England, and Winifred separated herself from the group. She was standing near her baggage, which had been flung out beside the track,

a little lonely figure, while the train went on, when Wyllard strode up to her.

"Feeling rather out of it? I do, anyway," he said. "Since we appear superfluous, we may as well make the most of the opportunity, especially as it will save you a long drive. There's a man here who wants to see you."

Winifred had felt very forlorn a few moments earlier, but the announcement Wyllard had just made was reassuring, and she pulled herself together as he signed to a man standing farther along the track. The latter wore neat store clothes, and his manner was brisk and business-like. It was a relief to the girl to see that he regarded her less as a personality than as a piece of commercial machinery, which he had been asked to make use of. She had found it easier to get on with men who confined themselves to that point of view.

"Mr. Hamilton, in charge of the elevator yonder," said Wyllard, pointing to one of the huge buildings. "This is Miss Rawlinson."

The elevator man made her the curtest of inclinations, and proceeded to arrange matters with a rapidity which took her breath away.

"I'm told you're a typist and stenographer?" he said. "Know anything about account-keeping?"

Winifred admitted that she possessed these abilities, and Hamilton appeared to reflect for a moment or two.

"Well," he said, "in a fortnight we'll give you a show. You can start at"—and he mentioned terms which rather astonished Winifred. "If you can keep things straight, we may raise you later."

"Won't you want to see any testimonials?" she asked.

"No," said Hamilton. "I've seen a good many, and I'm inclined to fancy some of the folks who

showed them must have bought them." He waved his hand. "Mr. Wyllard assures me that you'll do, and in the meanwhile that's enough for me."

It struck Winifred as curious that, while Agatha had written to Hawtrey on her behalf, it was Wyllard who had secured her the opportunity she had longed for; but she thanked the elevator man before she turned to her companion.

"There's another matter," she said hesitatingly, "I'll have to live here?"

Wyllard smiled. "I've seen to that, though, if you don't like my arrangements, you can alter them afterwards. Mrs. Sandberg will take you in, and even if she isn't particularly amiable, you'll be in safe hands."

Hamilton laughed. "Oh yes," he said. "She's a Scot—old type Calvinist at that. No frivolity about that woman. Married a Scandinavian, and was just breaking him in when he was killed back East along the track."

"We'll consider it as fixed, but in the meanwhile you're to stay with Mrs. Hastings for the fortnight," said Wyllard. "Sproatly"—and he signed to the man in the skin coat—"will you get Miss Rawlinson's baggage into your wagon?"

The man took off his fur cap. "If Miss Rawlinson would like to see Mrs. Sandberg, I'll drive her round," he suggested. "We'll catch you up in a league or so. Gregory has a bit of patching to do on his off-side trace."

"He might have had things straight for once," murmured Wyllard.

Winifred permitted Sproatly to help her into his wagon—a high, narrow-bodied vehicle, mounted on tall, spidery wheels—but she had to hold fast to it while they jolted across the track and through the mire into the unpaved street of the town. She

liked her companion's voice and manner, though she was far from prepossessed by his appearance. Two or three minutes later he drew up before a wooden house, where they were received by a tall, hard-faced woman, who frowned at Sproatly.

"Ye'll tak' your pictures and patent medicines somewhere else. I'm wanting nane," she said.

Sproatly grinned. "You needn't be afraid of them. They couldn't hurt you. I was talking to a Winnipeg doctor who'd a notion of coming out, a day or two ago. I told him, if he did, he'd have to bring an axe along."

Then he explained that Wyllard had sent Winifred there, and the woman favoured her with a glance of careful scrutiny.

"Weel," she said, "ye look quiet, anyway." Then she added, as though further satisfied: "I'll mak' ye a cup of tea if ye can wait."

Sproatly assured her that there was not time, and in a few more minutes the girl, who went into the house, got into the wagon again, with relief in her face.

"I think I owe Mr. Wyllard a good deal," she said.

Sproatly laughed. "You're not exactly singular in that respect, but you had better hold tight. These beasts are less than half-broken."

He flicked them with the whip, and they went across the track at a gallop, hurling great clods of mud left and right, while the group of loungers who still stood about the station raised a shout.

"Got any little pictures with nice motters on them?" asked one, and another flung a piece of information after the jolting wagon.

"There's a Swede down at Branker's wants a bottle that will supple up a wooden leg!" he said.

Sproatly grinned and waved his hand to them before he turned to the girl.

"We have to get through before dark, if possible, or I'd stop and sell them something, sure," he said. "Parts of the trail farther on are pretty bad."

Winifred thought it was far from excellent as it was, for spouts of mud flew up beneath the sinking hoofs and wheels, and she was already getting unpleasantly spattered.

"You think you would have succeeded?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Sproatly. "If I couldn't plant something on to them when they'd given me a lead like that, I'd be no use in this business. At present, my command of Western phraseology is my fortune."

"You sell things, then?"

Sproatly pointed to a couple of big boxes in the bottom of the wagon. "Anything from cough-cure to hair-restorer, besides a general-purpose elixir that's specially prepared for me. It's adaptable to any complaint and season. All you have to do"—and he lowered his voice confidentially—"is to put on a different label."

Winifred, who had not felt like it a little earlier, laughed when she met his eyes.

"What happens to the people who buy it?" she asked.

"Most of them are bachelors, and tough. They've stood their own cooking so long that they ought to be; and if anybody's really sick, I hold off and tell him to wait until a doctor comes along. A sensitive conscience," he added reflectively, "is a handicap in this profession."

"Have you always followed it?" asked Winifred, who was amused at him.

"No," said Sproatly. "Although you mightn't believe it, I was raised with the idea that I should have my choice between the Church and the Bar.

The idea, however, proved—impracticable—which, in some respects, is rather a pity. A man who can work off cough-cures and cosmetics on to healthy folks with a hide like leather, and talk a scoffer off the field, ought to have made his mark in either calling."

He looked at her as if for confirmation of this view, but Winifred glanced at the two wagons that moved on, perhaps two miles away, across the grey-white sweep of prairie.

"Will we overtake them?" she asked.

"We'll probably come up with Gregory. I'm not sure about Wyllard."

"He drives faster horses?"

"That's not quite the reason. Gregory has patched up one trace with a bit of string, and odd bolts are addicted to coming out of his wagon. Sometimes it makes trouble. I've known the team leave him sitting on the prairie, thinking of endearing names for them, and come home with the pole."

"Does he generally let things fall into that state?"

Sproatly was on his guard.

"Well," he said, "it's that kind of wagon."

Then he flicked the team again, and the jolting rendered it difficult for Winifred to ask any more questions.

In the meanwhile, Agatha and Hawtrey found it almost as impossible to sustain a conversation, which was, on the whole, a relief to the girl. The string-patched trace still held, and the wagon pole was a new one, but where they were just then the white grass was tussocky and long, and the trail they occasionally plunged into, to avoid it, had been churned into a quagmire. Hawtrey had packed the driving-robe high about his companion, and slipped one arm about her waist beneath it; but she knew that she suffered this rather than derived any satisfaction from it. She strove to assure her-

self that she was jaded with the journey, which was the case, and that the lowering sky and cheerless waste had a depressing effect on her, which was also possible. There was not a tree on it.

She was, however, forced to admit that her weariness and the dreary surroundings did not explain everything. Even her lover's first embrace had brought her no thrill. This was disconcerting; but while she would admit no definite reason for it, there was creeping upon her a vague consciousness that the man was not the one she had so often thought of in England. He seemed different—almost, in fact, a stranger—though she could not tell where the change in him began. His laughter jarred. Some of the things he said appeared almost inane, and others were tinged with a self-confidence that did not become him. She fancied him shallow, lacking in comprehension, and once she caught herself comparing him with another man. She, however, broke off that train of thought abruptly, and once more endeavoured to find the explanation in herself. Weariness had induced this captious, hypercritical fit, and by and by she would become used to him, she said.

Hawtreys was, at least, not effusive, for which she was thankful, but when they reached a smoother surface he began to talk of England.

"I suppose you saw a good deal of my folks when you were at the Grange?" he said.

"No," said Agatha, "I saw them once or twice."

"Ah!" said the man, with a trace of sharpness. "Then they were not particularly agreeable?"

Agatha deemed him tactless in suggesting anything of the kind.

"One could hardly go so far as that," she said. "Still, I couldn't help feeling that they were making an effort to be gracious to me."

"They did what they could to make things pleasant when they were first told of our engagement."

Agatha was too worn-out to be altogether on her guard, which was partly why she had admitted as much as she had done, though his relatives' attitude had wounded her, and she answered without reflection.

"I'm inclined to fancy that was because they never quite believed it would lead to anything."

She knew this was the truth now, though it was the first time the explanation had occurred to her. Gregory's folks, who were acquainted with his character, had, it seemed, not expected him to carry his promise out.

"I'm afraid they never had a very great opinion of me."

"Then," said Agatha, looking up at him, "it will be our business to prove them wrong; but I really think you have undertaken a big responsibility, Gregory. There must be so much that I ought to do, and I know so little about your work in this country." She turned, and glanced with a shiver at the dim white prairie. "It looks so forbidding and unyielding. It must be very hard to turn it into wheat-fields—to break it in."

It was merely a hint of what she felt, and it was a pity that Hawtrey, who lacked imagination, usually contented himself with the most obvious meaning of the spoken word. Things might have gone differently had he responded with comprehending sympathy.

"Oh," he said, with a laugh that changed her mood, "you'll learn, and I don't suppose it will matter a great deal if you don't do it quickly. Somehow or other one worries through."

She felt that this was insufficient, though she remembered that his haphazard carelessness had once appealed to her. Now, however, she realized

that to undertake a thing light-heartedly was a very different matter from carrying it out successfully. Then she owned to herself that she was becoming absurdly hypercritical, and strove to talk of other things.

She did not find it easy, nor, though he made the effort, did Hawtreys. There was a restraint which he chafed at upon him, for, when he first saw her, he had been struck by the change in the girl. She was graver than he remembered her, and very much more reserved. He had tried and failed, as he thought of it, to strike a spark out of her. She did not respond, and he became uneasily conscious that he could not talk to her as he could, for instance, to Sally Creighton. There was something wanting in him or her, but he could not at the moment tell what it was. Still, he said, things would be different next day, for the girl must be weary.

In the meanwhile, the dusk settled down upon the wilderness. The trail they now drove into grew rapidly rougher, and it was quite dark when they came to the brink of a declivity still a league from the Hastings' homestead.

Hawtreys swung the whip when they reached the top, and the team plunged furiously down the slope. Then something seemed to crack, and she saw the off-side horse stumble and plunge. The other beast flung its head up, Hawtreys shouted something, and there was a great smashing and snapping of undergrowth and fallen branches, as they drove in among the birches. Then the team stopped, and Hawtreys, who sprang down, floundered noisily among the undergrowth, while another thud of hoofs and rattle of wheels grew louder behind them up the trail. In a minute or two he came back and lifted Agatha down.

"It's the trace broken. I had to make the holes

with my knife, and the string's torn through," he said. "Voltigeur got it round his feet, and, as usual, tried to bolt. Anyway, we'll make the others pull up and take you in."

They went back to the trail together, and reached it just as Hastings reined in his team. He got down and walked back with Hawtrey to the latter's wagon. It was a minute or two before they reappeared, when Mrs. Hastings, who had alighted in the meanwhile, drew Hawtrey aside.

"I almost think it would be better if you didn't come any farther to-night," she said.

"Why?" the man asked sharply.

"I believe Agatha would prefer it. For she's worn out, and wants quietness."

"You feel sure of that?"

There was something in the man's voice which suggested that he was not satisfied, and his companion was silent a moment.

"It's good advice, Gregory," she replied. "She'll be better able to face the situation after a night's rest."

"Does it require much facing?" Hawtrey asked dryly.

Mrs. Hastings turned from him with a frown of impatience. "Of course it does. Anyway, if you're wise, you'll do what I suggest, and ask no more questions."

Then her husband handed her up into the wagon, and Hawtrey stood still beside the trail, feeling unusually thoughtful when they drove away.

CHAPTER XI

AGATHA'S DECISION

It was with an expectancy which was slightly toned down by one or two misgivings that Hawtrey drove

over to the Hastings' homestead the next afternoon. The misgivings were not unnatural, for he had been chilled by the girl's reception of him on the previous day, and her manner afterwards had left something to be desired. Indeed, when she drove away with Mrs. Hastings, he had felt himself an injured man.

His efforts to mend the harness, and extricate the wagon in the dark, which occupied him for an hour, had, however, partly helped to drive the matter from his mind, and when he reached his homestead, he slept soundly until sunrise, which was significant. Hawtreys was a man who never brooded over his troubles beforehand, and this was, perhaps, one reason why he did not always cope with them very successfully when they could no longer be avoided.

When he had made his breakfast, however, he became sensible of a pique against both Mrs. Hastings and the girl, which led him to remember that he had no hired man, and there was a good deal to be done. It might be well to wait until the afternoon before he called on them, and for several hours he drove his team through the crackling stubble. His doubts and irritation grew weaker as he did so, and when at length he rode into sight of the Hastings' homestead, his buoyant temperament was reasserting itself. Clear sunshine streamed down upon the prairie out of a vault of cloudless blue, and any faint shadow that might have arisen between him and the girl would be readily swept away.

But he was less sure of this when he saw her. Agatha sat near an open window, in a scantily furnished match-boarded room, and she, at least, as it happened, had not slept at all. Her eyes were heavy, but there was a look of resolution in them which seemed out of place, and it struck him that she had lost the freshness which had characterized her in England.

She rose when he came in, and then, to his astonishment, drew back a pace or two when he moved impulsively towards her.

"No," she said, with a hand raised restrainingly, "you must hear what I have to say, and try to bear with me. It is difficult, Gregory, but it must be said at once."

The man stood still, almost awkwardly, gazing at her with bewilderment in his face, and she looked steadily at him. It was a painful moment, for she was just then gifted with a clearness of vision which she almost longed to be delivered from. She saw that the impression which had brought her a vague sense of dismay on the previous afternoon was wrong. The trouble was that he had not changed at all. He was what he had always been, and she had merely deceived herself when she had permitted her girlish fancy to endue him with qualities and graces which he had never possessed. There was, however, no doubt that she had still a duty towards him.

He spoke first, with a trace of hardness in his voice.

"Then," he said, "won't you sit down. This is naturally a little—embarrassing, but I'll try to listen."

Agatha sank into a seat, for she felt physically worn-out, and she shrank from the task before her.

"Gregory," she said, "I feel that we have come near making what might prove to be a horrible mistake."

"We?" rejoined Hawtrey, while the blood rose into his weather-darkened face. "That means both of us."

"Yes," said Agatha, with a quietness that cost her an effort.

Hawtre spread his hands out forcibly. "Do you want me to admit that I've made one?"

"Are you sure you haven't?"

She flung the question at him sharply in tense apprehension, for if the man was sure of himself, there was only one course open to her. He leaned upon the table, gazing at her, and, as he did so, his indignation melted, and doubts commenced to creep into his mind.

She looked weary and grave, and almost haggard, and it was a fresh, light-hearted girl he had fallen in love with in England. The mark of the last two years of struggle was plain on her, though, while he did not recognize this, it would pass away again. He tried to realize what he had looked for when he had asked her to marry him, and could not do so clearly; but there was in the back of his mind a half-formulated notion that it had been a cheerful companion, somebody to amuse him. She scarcely seemed likely to do this now. He was, however, not one of the men who can face a crisis collectedly, and his thoughts became confused, until one idea emerged from them. He had pledged himself to her, and the fact laid a certain obligation upon him. It was his part to overrule any fancies she might be disposed to indulge in.

"Well," he said stoutly, "I'm not going to admit anything of that kind. The journey has been too much for you. You haven't got over it yet." He lowered his voice, and his face softened. "Aggy, dear, I've waited four years for you."

That stirred her, for it was true, and his gentleness had also its effect. The situation was becoming more and more difficult, since it seemed impossible to make him understand that he would in all probability speedily tire of her. She now recognized this, but to make it clear that she could never be

satisfied with him was a thing she shrank from.

"How have you passed those four years?" she asked, to gain time.

For a moment his conscience smote him. He remembered the trips to Winnipeg, and the dances to which he had attended Sally Creighton, though Agatha could have heard nothing of Sally.

"I spent them in hard work. I wanted to make the place more comfortable for you," he replied. "It is true"—he added this with a twinge of uneasiness, as he remembered that his neighbours had done much more with less incentive—"that it's still very far from what I would like, but things have been against me."

The speech had a stronger effect than he could have expected, for Agatha remembered Wyllard's description of what the prairie farmer had to face. Those four years of determined effort and patient endurance, which was how she pictured them, counted heavily against her in the man's favour. It flashed upon her that there might have been some warrant for the view she had held of Gregory's character when he had fallen in love with her. He was younger then; there must have been latent possibilities in him, but the years of toil had killed them and hardened him. For her sake he had made the struggle, and now it seemed unthinkable that she should renounce him because he came to her with the dust and stain of it upon him. For all that, she intuitively felt that she would involve them both in disaster if she yielded. Something warned her that she must stand fast.

"Gregory," she said, "I seem to know that we should both be sorry afterwards if I kept my promise."

Hawtrey straightened himself with a smile she recognized. She had liked him for it once, for it had then suggested the joyous courage of untainted

youth. Now it struck her as only hinting at empty, complacent assurance. She hated herself for the fancy, but it would not be driven away.

"Well," he replied, "I'm willing to face that hazard. I suppose this diffidence is only natural, Aggy, but it's hard on me."

"No," said the girl sharply, with a strained look in her eyes, "it's horribly unnatural, and that's why I'm afraid. I should have come to you gladly, without a misgiving, feeling that nothing could hurt me if I was with you. I wanted to do that, Gregory—I meant to—but I can't." Then her voice fell to a tone that had vibrant regret in it. "You should have made sure—married me when you last came home."

"But I'd nowhere to take you. The farm was only half-broken prairie, the homestead almost uninhabitable."

Agatha winced at this. It was, no doubt, true, but it seemed petty and commonplace. His comprehension stopped at such details as these, and he had given her no credit for the courage which would have made light of bodily discomfort.

"Do you think—that would have mattered? We were both very young then, and we could have faced our troubles and grown up together. Now we're not the same. You allowed me to grow up alone."

Hawtreys spread his hands out. "I haven't changed."

He contented himself with that, and Agatha grew more resolute. There was no spark of imagination in him, scarcely even a spark of the passion which, if it had been strong enough, might have swept her away in spite of her shrinking. He was a man of comely presence, whimsical and quick, as she remembered, at light badinage, but when there was a crisis

to be grappled with he somehow failed. His graces were on the surface. There was no depth in him.

"Aggy," he added humbly, when he should have been dominantly forceful, "it is only a question of time. You will get used to me."

"Then"—and the girl clutched at the chance of respite—"give me six months from to-day. It isn't very much to ask, Gregory."

The man wrinkled his brows. "It's a great deal," he answered slowly. "I seem to feel that we shall drift farther and farther apart if once I let you go."

"Then you feel that we have drifted a little already?"

"I don't know what has come over you, Aggy, but you're different. I'm what I was, and I want to keep you."

Agatha rose and turned towards him white in face. "Then if you are wise you will not urge me now."

Hawtrey met her gaze for a moment, and then made a sign of acquiescence as he turned his eyes away. He recognized that this was a new Agatha, one whose will was stronger than his. Yet he was half-astonished that he had yielded so readily.

"Well," he said, "if it must be, I can only give way to you, but I must be free to come here whenever I wish." Then a thought seemed to strike him. "But you may have to go away," he added, with sudden concern. "If I am to wait six months, what are you to do in the meanwhile?"

The girl smiled wearily. Now the respite had been granted her, his question caused her no concern.

"Oh," she said, "we can think of that later; I have borne enough to-day. This has been a trial to me, Gregory."

"I don't think it has been particularly easy for

either of us," said Hawtreys, with a trace of grimness. "Anyway, it seems that I'm only distressing you." He smiled wryly. "It's naturally not what I had expected to do. I'll come back when I've grasped the situation."

He moved a pace or two nearer, and taking one of her hands swiftly stooped and kissed her cheek.

"My dear," he added, "I only want to make it as easy as I can. You'll try to think of me favourably."

Then he went out and left her sitting with a troubled face beside the open widow. A warm breeze swept into the almost empty room, and outside a blaze of sunshine rested on the prairie. It was torn up with wheel-ruts about the house, for the wooden building rose abruptly without fence or garden from the waste of whitened grass. Close to it stood a birch-log barn or stables, its sides ridged and furrowed where the trunks were laid on one another, roofed with wooden shingles that had warped into hollows here and there. Farther away there rose another long building, apparently of sod, and a great shapeless yellow mound with a domed top towered behind the latter. It was most unlike a trim English rick, besides being bigger, and Agatha wondered what it could be. As a matter of fact, it was a not uncommon form of granary, the straw from the last thrashing flung over a birch-pole frame.

Behind that there ran a great breadth of knee-deep stubble, blazing ochre and cadmium in the sunlight. It had evidently extended farther than it did, for a blackened space showed where a fire had been lighted to destroy it. Here Hastings, clad in blue duck, with long boots, was ploughing, plodding behind his horses, which stopped now and then when the share jarred against a patch of still frozen soil. Farther on two other men, silhouetted in blue against

the whitened grass, drove spans of slowly moving oxen that hauled big breaker ploughs, and the lines of clods that lengthened behind them gleamed in the sunlight a rich chocolate-brown. Beyond them the wilderness ran unbroken to the horizon.

Agatha gazed at it all vacantly, but the newness and strangeness of it reacted upon her. She felt very desolate and lonely, and by and by remembered that she had still to grapple with a practical difficulty. She could not stay with Mrs. Hastings indefinitely, and she had not the least notion where to go or what she was to do. She was leaning back in her chair wearily, with half-closed eyes, when her hostess came in and looked at her with a smile that suggested comprehension. Mrs. Hastings was thin, and looked a trifle worn, but she had shrewd, kindly eyes. She was wearing a plain print dress, which was dusted here and there with flour.

"So you have sent him away?" she said.

Agatha felt somehow that she could be candid with this woman, who, she fancied, had already guessed the truth.

"Yes," she said, "for six months. That is, we are not to decide on anything until then. I felt we must get used to each other. It seemed best."

"To you. Did it seem best to Gregory?"

The colour crept into Agatha's face. Though his acquiescence had been a relief to her, he might have made a more vigorous protest.

"He gave in to me," she answered.

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "Well," she said, "I believe you were wise, but that opens up another question. What will you do in the meanwhile?"

"I don't know," said Agatha. "I suppose I shall have to go away—to Winnipeg, most probably. I could teach, I think."

"How are you and Gregory to get used to each other if you go away?"

Agatha smiled feebly. "It would be difficult, wouldn't it."

"Are you very anxious to get used to him?"

The girl shrank from the question; but there was a constraining kindliness in her companion's eyes.

"I daren't think about it yet. I mean to try. I must try. I seem to be playing an utterly contemptible, selfish part, but I could not marry him—now!"

Her hostess quietly crossed the room, and sat down by her side.

"My dear," she said, "as I told you, I think you are doing right, and in some respects I believe I know how you feel. Everybody prophesied disaster when I came out to join Allen from a sheltered home in Montreal, and at the beginning my life here was not easy to me. It was so different, and there were times when I was afraid, and my heart was horribly heavy. If it hadn't been for Allen I think I should have given in and broken down. He understood, however. He never failed me."

Agatha's eyes grew misty, and she turned her head away.

"Yes," she said, "that would make it wonderfully easier."

"You must forgive me," said her companion. "It was tactless, but I didn't mean to hurt you. Well, one difficulty shouldn't give us very much trouble. Why shouldn't you stay here with me?"

Agatha turned towards her abruptly with relief in her face, from which it, however, faded again. She liked this woman, and she liked her husband, but she remembered that she had no claim on them.

"Oh," she said, "it is out of the question."

"Wait little. I'm proposing to give you as much

as you will probably care to do. There are my two girls to teach, and I think they have taken to you. I can scarcely find a minute to do it myself, and, as you have seen, there is a piano which has, after all, only a few of the notes broken. Besides, we have only one Scandinavian maid, who smashes everything that isn't made of indurated fibre, and I'm afraid she'll marry one of the boys in a month or two. It was only by sending the kiddies to Brandon and getting Mrs. Creighton, a neighbour of ours, to look after Allen, who insisted on my going, that I was able to get to Paris with some Montreal friends. In any case, you'd have no end of duties."

"You are doing this out of—charity?"

Mrs. Hastings laughed. "Allen wrote some friends of his in Winnipeg to send me anybody out a week or two ago."

The girl's eyes shone mistily. "Oh," she said, "you have lifted one weight off my mind."

"I think," said Mrs. Hastings, "the others will also be removed in due time."

Then she talked cheerfully of other matters, and Agatha listened to her with a faint wonder, which was, however, not altogether justified, at her good fortune in falling in with such a friend, for there are in that country a good many men and women who resemble this farmer's wife in one respect. Unfettered by conventions, they stretch out an open hand to the stranger and the outcast. Toil has brought them charity in place of hardness, and still retaining, as some of them do, the culture of the cities, they have outgrown all the petty bonds of caste. The wheat-grower and the hired man eat together, his wife or daughter mends the latter's clothes, and the labourer, as the natural result of it, often makes the farmer's cause his own. Rights are good-humouredly conceded in place of being fought for, and any sense of grievance

and half-veiled suspicion is exchanged for an efficient co-operation. It must, however, be admitted that there are also farmers of another kind, from whom the hired man has some difficulty in extracting his covenanted wages save by personal violence. That, too, fails now and then.

By and by a team and a jolting wagon swept into sight, and Mrs. Hastings rose when the man who drove it pulled his horses up.

"It's Sproatly; I wonder what has brought him here," she said, and as the man who sprang down walked towards the house she gazed at him almost incredulously.

"He's quite smart," she added. "I don't see a single patch on his jacket, and he has positively got his hair cut."

"Is that an unusual thing in Mr. Sproatly's case?" Agatha asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hastings. "It's very unusual indeed. What is stranger still, he has taken the old grease-spotted band off his hat, after clinging to it affectionately for the last twelve months."

Agatha fancied that the soft hat, which fell shapelessly over part of Sproatly's face, needed something to replace the discarded band; but in another moment or two he entered the room. He shook hands with them both, and then sat down and smiled.

"You are looking remarkably fresh, but appearances are not invariably to be depended on, and it's advisable to keep the system up to par," he said. "I suppose you don't want a tonic of any kind?"

"I don't," Mrs. Hastings declared resolutely; "Allen doesn't, either. Besides, didn't you get into some trouble over that tonic?"

"It was the cough-cure," said Sproatly with a grin. "I sold a man at Lander's one of the large-sized bottles, and when he had taken some he felt a good deal

better. Then he seems to have argued the thing out like this : if one dose had eased the cough, a dozen should drive it out altogether, and he took the lot. He slept for forty-eight hours afterwards, and when I came across him at the settlement he attacked me with a club. The fault, I may point out, was in his logic. Perhaps you would like some pictures. I've a striking oleograph of the Kaiser. It must be like him, for two of his subjects recognized it. One hung it up in his shanty. The other asked me to hold it out, and then pitched a stove billet through the middle of it. But he produced his dollar—said he felt so much better after doing it that he didn't grudge the money."

"I'm afraid we're not worth powder and shot," said Mrs. Hastings. "Do you remember our buying any tonics or pictures from you?"

"I don't, though I have thought that you ought to have done," and Sproatly, who paused a moment, turned towards Agatha with a bend of his head. "The professional badinage of an unlicensed dealer in patent medicines may now and then mercifully cover his embarrassment. Miss Ismay has brought the daintiness of the Old Country along with her."

His hostess disregarded the last remark. "Then if you didn't expect to sell us anything, what did you come for?"

"For supper," Sproatly answered cheerfully. "Besides that, to take Miss Rawlinson for a drive. I told her last night it would afford me pleasure to show her the prairie. We could go round by Lander's and back."

"Then you will probably come across her somewhere about the strawpile with the kiddies."

Sproatly took the hint, and when we went out, Mrs. Hastings laughed.

"You would hardly suppose that was a young man of excellent education?" she said. "So it's on Wini-

fred's account he has driven over ; at first I fancied it was on yours."

Agatha was astonished, but she smiled. " If Winifred favours him with her views about young men, he will be rather sorry for himself," she answered. " He lives near you ? "

" No," said Mrs. Hastings ; " in the summer he lives in his wagon, or under it, I don't know which. Of course, if he's taken with Winifred, he will have to alter that."

" But he has only seen her once. You can't mean that he is serious ? "

Mrs. Hastings laughed. " I can't speak for Sproatly, but it would be in keeping with the customs of the country if he were."

A minute or two later Agatha saw Winifred in the wagon which reappeared from behind the straw-pile, and Mrs. Hastings turned towards the window.

" She has gone with him," she said significantly. " Unfortunately, he has taken my kiddies too. If he brings them back with no bones broken it will be a relief to me."

CHAPTER XII

WANDERERS

AGATHA had spent a month with Mrs. Hastings when the latter, who was driving over to Wyllard's home-
stead with her one afternoon, pulled up her team while they were still some distance away from it, and looked about her with evident interest. On the one hand, a vast breadth of torn-up loam ran back across the prairie, which was now faintly flecked with green. On the other, ploughing-teams were scattered here and there across the tussocky sod, and long lines of clods that flashed where the sunlight struck their facets

trailed out behind them. The great sweep of grasses that rustled joyously before a glorious warm wind gleamed almost luminous, and overhead hung a vault of blue without a cloud in it. Spread out across it, skeins and wisps of birds moved up from the south.

"Harry is sowing a very big crop this year, and most of it on fall back-set," she said. "He has, however, horses enough to do that kind of thing, and, of course, he does it thoroughly." Then she glanced towards where the teams were hauling unusually heavy ploughs through the grassy sod. "It's virgin prairie he's breaking yonder, and he'll put oats on it. They ripen quicker. He ought to be a rich man after harvest unless the frost comes, or the market goes against him. Some of his neighbours, including my husband, would have sown a bit less and held a reserve in hand."

Agatha remembered what Wyllard had told her one night on board the *Scarrowmania*, and smiled, for she fancied that she understood the man. He was not one to hedge, as she had heard it called, or cautiously hold his hand. He staked boldly, not solely for the sake of the dollars he might stand to gain. It was part of his nature—the result of an optimistic faith that appealed to her, and sheer love of effort. She also fancied that his was no spasmodic, impulsive activity. She could imagine him holding on as steadfastly with everything against him, exacting all that men and teams and implements could do.

In the meanwhile he was approaching them, sitting in the driving-seat of a big machine that ripped broad furrows through the crackling sod. Four horses plodded wearily in front of it until he thrust one hand over, and there was a rattle and clanking as he swung them and the machine round beside the wagon. Then he got down, and stood smiling up at Agatha with his soft hat in his hand and the sunlight falling full upon

his weather-darkened face. It was not a particularly striking face, but there was in it a hint of restrained force, and steadfastness, she thought, which Gregory's did not possess, and for a moment or two she studied him unobtrusively. She could not help it.

He wore an old blue shirt, open at the throat and belted into trousers of blue duck at the waist, and she noticed the sinewy symmetry of his spare figure. The absence of superfluous flesh was in keeping with her view of his character; but apart from the strong vitality that was expressed in every line of his pose he looked clean, as she vaguely described it to herself. There was an indefinable something about him that was born of a simple, healthful life spent in determined labour in the open air. It became plainer as she remembered other men she had met upon whom the mark of the beast was unmistakable. Then Mrs. Hastings broke the silence.

"Well," she said, "we have driven over as we promised. I've no doubt you will give us supper, but we'll go on and sit down with Mrs. Nansen in the meanwhile. I expect you're too busy to talk to us."

Wyllard laughed, and Agatha thought his laugh was wholesome as well as pleasant.

"I generally am busy," he admitted. "These beasts have, however, been at it since sun-up, and they're rather played out now. I'll talk to you as long as you like after supper, which will soon be ready. It's bad economy to ask too much from them."

Agatha noticed that though the near horse's coat was foul with dust and sweat he laid his brown hand upon it, and she supposed she must be fanciful, for it seemed to her that the gentleness with which he did it was very suggestive.

"I wonder if that's the only reason that influences you," she said.

A twinkle crept into Wyllard's eyes. "It's a good

one as far as it goes ; anyway, I've been driven hard myself now and then, and I didn't like it."

"Doesn't that usually result in making one drive somebody else harder to make up for it, when one has the opportunity ? "

"If it does it certainly isn't logical. Logic's rather a fine thing when it's sound."

"Then," Mrs. Hastings broke in, "I'll suggest a proposition : what's to be the result of all this ploughing if we have harvest frost or the market goes against you ? "

"Quite a big deficit," said Wyllard cheerfully.

"And that doesn't cause you any concern ? "

"In any case, I'll have had some amusement for my money."

Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha. "He calls working from sunrise until it's dark, and afterwards now and then, amusement ! " Then she looked back at Wyllard. "I believe it isn't easy for you to hold your back as straight as you are doing, and that off-horse looks as if it wanted to lie down."

Wyllard laughed. "It won't until after supper, anyway. There are two more rows of furrows still to do."

"I suppose that is a hint," and Mrs. Hastings glanced at Agatha when the wagon jolted on.

"That man," she said, "is a great favourite of mine. For one thing, he's fastidious, though he's fortunately very far from perfect in some respects. He has a red-hot temper, which now and then runs away with him."

"What do you mean by fastidious ? "

"It's difficult to define, but I don't mean pernicketty. Of course, there is a fastidiousness which makes one shrink from unpleasant things, but Harry's is the other kind. It impels him to do them every now and then."

Agatha made no answer. She was uneasily conscious that it might not be advisable to think too much about this man, and in another minute or two they reached the homestead. The house was a plain frame building that had apparently grown out of an older and smaller one of logs, part of which remained. It was much the same with the barns and stables, for while they were stoutly built of framed timber or logs, one end of most of them was lower than the rest, and in some cases consisted of poles and sods. Even to her untrained eye all she saw suggested order, neatness, and efficiency. The whole was flanked and sheltered by a big birch bluff, in which trunks and branches showed up through a thin green haze of tiny opening leaves, though here and there uncovered twigs still cut in lace-like tracery against the blue of the sky.

A man whom Wyllard had sent after them took the horses, and when she got down Agatha commented on what she called the added-to look of the buildings.

"The Range," said Mrs. Hastings, "has grown rapidly since Harry took hold. The old part represents the high-water mark of his father's efforts. Of course," she added reflectively, "Harry has had command of some capital since a relative of his died, but I never thought that explained everything."

Then they entered the house, and a grey-haired Swedish woman led them through several match-boarded rooms into a big, cool hall. She left them there for awhile, and Agatha was busy for a minute or two with her impressions of the house. It was singularly empty by comparison with the few English homesteads she had seen. There were neither curtains nor carpets nor hangings of any kind, but it was commodious and comfortable.

"What can a bachelor want with a place like this?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Hastings; "perhaps it's

Harry's idea of having everything proportionate. The Range is a big and generally prosperous farm. Besides, it's likely that he doesn't contemplate remaining a bachelor for ever. Indeed, Allen and I sometimes wonder how he has escaped so long."

"Is that the right word?" Agatha asked.

"It is," said her companion with a laugh. "You see, he's highly eligible from our point of view, but at the same time he seems invulnerable. I believe," she added dryly, "that's the right word too."

Then the Swedish housekeeper appeared again, and they talked with her until she retired to bring the six o'clock supper. Soon after it was laid out Wyllard and the men came in. He was attired as when Agatha had last seen him, except that he had brushed himself and put on a store jacket. He led his guests to the head of the long table, but the men—and there were a number of them—sat below, and had no diffidence about addressing question or comment to their employer.

They ate with a somewhat voracious haste, but that appeared to be the custom of the country, and Agatha could find no great fault with their manners or conversation. The latter was, for the most part, quaintly witty, and some of them used what struck her as remarkably fitting and original similes. Indeed, as the meal proceeded, she became interested in the men and their surroundings.

The windows were open wide, and a sweet, warm air swept into the room. The spaciousness of the latter impressed her, and she was pleased with the unity between these strong-armed toilers and their leader. He sat, self-contained, but courteous and responsive to all alike, at the head of his table, and though it was, as she had discovered, in most respects an essentially democratic country, she felt there was something almost feudal in the relations between him

and his men. She could not imagine their being confined to the mere exaction of so much labour on the one hand, and the expectation of payment of wages due on the other. She was also pleased that he had not changed his dress, which would have been a singularly unfitting action. In fact, so strong was her interest that she was astonished when the meal was over, though it must be admitted that most of the men rose and went out in fifteen minutes. Afterwards she and Mrs. Hastings talked with the housekeeper for awhile, and an hour had slipped away when Wyllard suggested that he should show her the sloo beyond the bluff.

"It's the nearest approach to a lake we have until you get to the alkali tract," he explained.

Agatha went with him through the shadow of the wood, and when at length they came out of it he found her a seat upon a fallen birch. The house and ploughing were hidden now, and they were alone on the slope to a slight hollow, in which half a mile of gleaming water lay. Its surface was broken here and there by tussocks of grass and reeds, and beyond it the prairie ran back unbroken, a dim grey waste, to the horizon. The sun had dipped behind the bluff, and the sky had become a vast green transparency. There was no wind, but a wonderful exhilarating freshness crept into the cooling air, and the stillness was only broken by the clamour of startled wildfowl, which presently sank again. Agatha could see them paddling in clusters about the shining sloo.

"Those are ducks—wild ones?" she asked.

"Yes," said Wyllard; "duck of various kinds. Most of them the same as your English ones."

"Do you shoot them?"

Agatha was not greatly interested, but he seemed disposed to silence, and she felt, for no very clear reason, that it was advisable to talk of something,

"No," he replied, "not often, anyway. If Mrs.

Nansen wants a couple, I crawl down to the long grass with the rifle and get them for her."

"The rifle? Doesn't the big bullet destroy them?"

"No," said Wyllard. "You have to shoot their head off or cut their neck in two."

"You can do that when they're right out in the sloo?" exclaimed Agatha, who had learned that it is much more difficult to shoot with a rifle than a shotgun, which spreads its charge.

Wyllard laughed. "Generally; that is, if I haven't been doing much just before. It depends upon one's hands. We have our game laws, but as a rule nobody worries about them, and, anyway, those birds won't nest until they reach the tundra by the Polar Sea. Still, as I said, we never shoot them unless Mrs. Nansen wants one or two for the pot."

"Why?"

"I don't know. For one thing, they're worn out; they just stop here to rest."

His answer appealed to the girl. It was not strange to her that the love of the lower creation should be strong in this man, who had no hesitation in confessing that the game laws were no restraint to him. For the most part, at least, when these Lesser Brethren sailed down out of the blue heavens worn with their journey he gave them right of sanctuary.

"They have come a long way?" she asked.

Wyllard pointed towards the South. "From Florida, Cuba, Yucatan; further than that, perhaps. In a day or two they'll push on again towards the Pole, and others will take their places. There's another detachment arriving now."

Looking up, Agatha saw a straggling wedge of birds dotted in dusky specks against the vault of transcendental green. It coalesced, drew out again, and dropped swiftly, and the air was filled with the rush of wings; then there was a harsh crying and splashing,

and she heard the troubled water lap among the reeds until deep silence closed in upon the sloo again.

"I wonder," she said, "why they do it?"

A smile crept into Wyllard's eyes. "It's their destiny; they're wanderers and strangers without a habitation; there's unrest in them. After a few months on the tundra mosses, to gather strength and teach the young to fly, they'll unfold their wings to beat another passage before the icy gales. Some of us, I think, are like them!"

Agatha could not avoid the personal application. It would have been less admissible among her friends at The Grange, but the constraints of English reticence were out of place in the wilderness.

"You surely don't apply that to yourself," she said. "You certainly have a habitation—the finest, isn't it, on this part of the prairie?"

"Yes," agreed Wyllard slowly; "I suppose it is. I've now had a little rest and quietness, too."

This did not call for an answer, and Agatha sat silent.

"Still," he said, "I have a feeling that some day the call will come, and I shall have to take the trail again." He paused, and looked at her before he added, "It would be easier if one hadn't to go alone, or, since that would be necessary, if one had at least something to come back to when the journey was done."

"It would be necessary?" said Agatha, who was puzzled by his steady gaze.

"Yes," he replied with an impressive gravity, "the call will come from the icy North if it ever comes at all."

There was another brief silence, and Agatha wondered what he was thinking of until he went on again.

"I remember how I last came back from there. We were late that season, and out of our usual beat when the gale broke upon us between Alaska and Asia in the gateway of the Pole. We ran before it with a

strip of the boom-foresail on her and a jib that blew to ribands every now and then. She was a little schooner of ninety tons or so, and for most of a week she scudded with the grey seas tumbling after her, white-topped, out of the snow and spume. They ranged high above her taffrail curling horribly, but one did not want to look at them. The only man on deck had a line about him, and he looked ahead, watching her screwing round with hove-up bows as she climbed the seas. If he'd let her fall off or claw up, the next one would have made an end of her. He was knee-deep half the time in icy brine, and his hands had split and opened with the frost, but the sweat dripped from him as he clung to the jarring wheel. One of these helmsmen—perhaps two—had another trouble which preyed on them. They were thinking of the three men they had left behind.

"Well," he added, "we ran out of the gale, and I had bitter words to face when we reached Vancouver. As one result of it I walked out of the city with four or five dollars in my pocket—though there was a share due to me. Then I rode up into the ranges in an open car to mend railroad bridges in the frost and snow. It was not the kind of home-coming one would care to look forward to."

"Ah," said Agatha, "it must have been very dreary?"

The man met her eyes. "Yes," he said, "you—know. You came here from far away, I think a little weary, too, and something failed you. Then you felt yourself adrift. There were—it seemed—only strangers round you, but you were wrong in one respect; you were by no means a stranger to me."

He had been leaning against a birch trunk, but now he moved nearer, and stood gravely looking down at her.

"You have sent Gregory away?" he said.

"Yes," said Agatha, and, startled as she was, it did

not strike her that the mere admission was misleading.

Wyllard stretched his hands out. "Then won't you come to me?"

The blood swept into the girl's face. For the moment she forgot Gregory, and was only conscious of an unreasoning impulse which prompted her to take the hands held out to her. Then she rose and faced the man, with burning cheeks.

"You know nothing of me," she broke out. "Can you think that I would let you take me—out of charity?"

"Again you're wrong—on both points. As I once told you, I have sat for hours beside the fire beneath the pines or among the boulders with your picture for company. When I was worn-out and despondent you encouraged me. You have been with me high up in the snow on the ranges, and through leagues of shadowy bush. That is not all, however, though it's difficult to speak of such things to you. There were times while we drove the branch line up the gorge beneath the big divide, when all one's physical nature shrank from the monotony of brutal labour. The pay-days came round, and opportunities were made for us—to forget what we had borne, and had still to bear, in the snow and the icy water. Then you laid a restraining hand on me. I could not take your picture where you could not go. Is all that to count for nothing?"

Then he spread his hands out forcibly. "As to the other matter, can't you get beyond the narrow point of view? We're in a big, new country where the old barriers are down. We're merely flesh and blood—red blood—and we speak as we feel. Admitting that I was sorry for you—I am—how does that tell against me—or you? There's one thing only that counts at all: I want you."

Agatha was stirred, and almost dismayed at the effect his words had on her. He had spoken with a

force and passion that had nearly swept her away with it. The vigour of the new land throbbed in his voice, and, flinging aside all cramping restraints and conventions, he had, as he had said, claimed her as flesh and blood. There was no doubt that her nature responded, and it was significant that Gregory had faded altogether out of her mind; but there was, after all, pride in her, and she could not quite bring herself to look at things from his standpoint. All her prejudices and her sense of fitness were opposed to it. For one thing, he had taken the wrong way when he had confessed that he was sorry for her. She did not want his compassion, and she shrank from the shadow of the thought that she would marry him—for shelter. It brought her a sudden, shameful confusion as she remembered the haste with which marriages were, it seemed, arranged on the prairie. Then, as the first unreasoning impulse which had almost compelled her to yield to him passed away, she remembered that it was scarcely two months since she had met him in England. It was intolerable that he should think she would be willing to fall into his arms merely because he had held them out to her.

"It's difficult to get beyond one's sense of what is fit," she replied. "You—I must say it again—can't know anything about me. You have woven fancies about the photograph, but you must recognize that I'm not the girl you have created out of them. In all probability she's wholly unreal, unnatural, visionary." She contrived to smile, for she was recovering her composure. "Perhaps it's easy when one has imagination to endow a person with qualities and graces that could never belong to them. It must be easy"—and though she was unconscious of it, there was a trace of bitterness in her voice—"because I know I could do it myself."

Again the man held his hands out. "Then," he

said simply, "won't you try? If you can only feel sure that the person has them it's possible that he could acquire one or two."

Agatha drew back, disregarding this. "Then I've changed ever so much since that photograph was taken."

Wyllard agreed. "Yes," he said, "I recognized that; you were immature then. I know that now—but all the graciousness and sweetness in you has ripened. What is more, it has grown just as I knew it would do. I saw that clearly the day we met beside the stepping-stones. I would have asked you to marry me in England only Gregory stood in the way."

Then the colour ebbed suddenly out of the girl's face as she remembered.

"Gregory," she replied in a strained voice, "stands in the way still. I didn't send him away altogether. I'm not sure I made that clear."

Wyllard started, but he stood very still again for a moment or two.

"I wonder," he said, "if there's anything significant in the fact that you gave me that reason last? He failed you in some way?"

"I'm not sure that I haven't failed him; but I can't go into that."

Again Wyllard stood silent awhile. Then he turned to her with the signs of a strong restraint in his face.

"Gregory," he said, "is a friend of mine; there is, at least, one very good reason why I should remember it, but somehow he hadn't the wit to keep you. Well, I can only wait in the meanwhile, but when the time seems ripe I shall ask you again. Until then you have my promise that I will not say another word that could distress you. Perhaps I had better take you back to Mrs. Hastings now."

Agatha turned away, and they walked back together silently through the bluff.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUMMONS

MRS. HASTINGS was standing beside her wagon in the gathering dusk when Agatha and Wyllard joined her, and after the latter had helped them up she looked down at him severely as she gathered up the reins.

"By this time Allen will have had to put the kiddies to bed," she said. "Christina, as you might have borne in mind, goes over to Branstock's every evening. Anyway, you'll drive across and see him about that team as soon as you can ; come to supper."

"I'll try," said Wyllard with some hesitation ; and Mrs. Hastings turned to her companion as they drove away.

"Why did he look at you before he answered me ? " she asked, and laughed, for there was light enough left to show the colour in Agatha's cheek. "Well," she added, "I told Allen he was sure to be the first."

Agatha looked at her in bewilderment, but she nodded. "Yes," she said, "of course, I knew it would come. Everybody knows by now that you have fallen out with Gregory."

"I haven't fallen out with him."

"But you haven't married him, and if you have said 'No' to Harry Wyllard because you would sooner take Gregory, you're a singularly unwise young woman. Still, you'll have to meet him when he comes to supper. Allen's fond of a talk with Harry ; I can't have him kept away."

"I was afraid of that," said Agatha quietly. "What makes the situation more difficult is that he told me he would ask me again."

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "In that case he will do it ; but I don't think you need feel diffident about meeting him, especially as you can't help it.

He'll wait and say nothing until he considers it advisable."

She changed the subject, and talked about other matters until they reached the homestead ; but as the weeks went by Agatha found that what she had told her was warranted.

Wyllard drove over every now and then, but she was reassured by his attitude. He greeted her with the quiet cordiality which had hitherto characterized him, and it went a long way towards allaying the embarrassment she was conscious of at first. By and by, however, she felt no embarrassment at all, in spite of the disturbing possibility that he might at some future time once more adopt the *rôle* of suitor. In the meanwhile, she realized that in face of the efforts she made to think of him tenderly she was drifting further apart from Gregory ; and she had, as it happened, two other offers of marriage before the wheat had shot up a hand's breadth above the rich black loam. This was a matter of regret to her, and, though Mrs. Hastings assured her that the " boys " would get over it, she was shocked to hear that one of them had shortly afterwards involved himself in difficulties by creating a disturbance in Winnipeg.

The wheat, however, was growing tall when, at Mrs. Hastings's request, she drove over with her again to Willow Range. Wyllard was out when they reached it, and leaving Mrs. Hastings and his housekeeper together she wandered into the open air. She went through the birch bluff and towards the sloo, which had almost dried up now, and it was with confused feelings she remembered what Wyllard had said to her there. Through them all there ran a regret that she had not met him four years earlier.

That was a train of thought she did not care to indulge in, and in order to get rid of it she walked more briskly up a low rise where the grass was already

turning white again, over the crest of it, and down the side of another hollow. The prairie rolled just there in wide undulations as the sea does when the swell of a distant gale under-runs a glassy calm. She had grown fond of this Western land, and its clear skies and fresh breezes had brought the colour to her cheeks and given her cheerfulness, though there were times when the knowledge that she was no nearer a decision in regard to Gregory weighed upon her like a chill depressing shadow. She had seen very little of him, and he had not been effusive then. What he felt she could not tell, but it had been a relief to her when he had ridden away again. Then for a while he faded to an unsubstantial figure in the back of her mind.

That afternoon the prairie stretched away before her gleaming in the sunlight under a vast sweep of cloudless blue. She was half-way down the long slope when a clash and tinkle reached her, and for the first time she noticed that a cloud of dust hung about the hollow at the foot of it, where there had been another sloo. It had dried up weeks ago, and as there were men and horses moving amidst the dust she supposed that they were cutting prairie hay, which grows longer in such places than upon the levels. She went on another half-mile, and then sat down, for she had walked farther than she had intended. She could now see the men more clearly, and though it was fiercely hot they were working at high pressure. Their blue duck clothing and bare brown arms appeared among the white and ochre tinting of the grass that seemed charged with brightness, and the sounds of their activity came up to her. She could distinguish the clashing tinkle of the mowers, the crackle of the harsh stems, and the rattle of wagon wheels.

By and by a great mound of gleaming grass overhanging two half-seen horses moved out of the sloo, and she watched it draw nearer until she made out

Wyllard sitting in a depression in the front of it. She sat still until he pulled the team up close beside her and looked down with a smile.

"It's 'most two miles to the homestead. If you could manage to climb up I could make you a comfortable place," he said.

Agatha held her hands up with one foot upon a spoke of the wheel as the man leaned down, and next moment she was strongly lifted and felt his supporting hand upon her waist. Then she found herself standing upon a narrow ledge clutching at the hay while he tore out several big armfuls of it and flung it back upon the load.

"Now," he said, "I guess you'll find that a snug enough nest."

She sank into it with a sense of physical satisfaction. The grass was scented with the aromatic odours of wild peppermint, and it yielded like a downy cushion beneath her limbs. Still, she was uneasy in mind, for she fancied she had seen a sudden sign of tension in the man's face when he had for a moment held her on the edge of the wagon. Unobserved she flashed a glance at him, and was reassured. He was looking straight before him with unwavering eyes, and his face was as quiet as it usually was again. Neither of them said anything until the team moved on. Then he turned to her.

"You won't get jolted much," he said. "They've been at it since four o'clock this morning."

"That," said Agatha, "must have meant that you rose at three."

Wyllard smiled. "As a matter of fact, it was half-past two. There was no dew last night, and we started early. I've several extra teams this year, and there's a good deal of hay to cut. Of course, we have to get it in the sloos or any damp place where it's long. We don't sow grass, and we have no meadows like those in England."

Agatha understood that he meant to talk about matters of no consequence, as he usually did. There was, as she had noticed, a vein of almost poetic imagination in this man, and his idea that she had been with him through the snow of the lonely ranges and the gloom of the great forests of the Pacific slope appealed to her, merely as a pretty fancy, in particular. He had, however, of late very seldom given it rein, and sitting close beside him among the yielding hay she decided that it was wiser to let him talk about his farm.

"But you have a foreman who could see the teams turned out, haven't you?" she asked.

"I had, but he left me three or four days ago. It's a pity in several ways, since I've taken up rather more than I can handle this year."

"Then why didn't you keep him?"

There was a grimness in Wyllard's laugh. "Martial was a trifle muleish, and I'm afraid I'm troubled with a shortness of temper now and then. We had a difference of opinion as to the best way to drive the mower into the sloo, and he didn't seem to recognize that he should have deferred to me. Unfortunately, as the boys were standing by, I had to insist upon him getting out of the saddle."

Agatha noticed that there was a bruise upon one side of his face. After what he had just told her, the sight jarred upon her, though she would not confess that there was any reason why it should do so. She could not deny that on the prairie a resort to physical force might be warranted by the lack of any other remedy, but it hurt her to think of his descending to an open brawl with one of his men.

Then it occurred to her that the other man had in all probability suffered more, and this brought her a certain sense of satisfaction which she admitted was more or less barbarous. She had made it clear that

Wyllard was nothing to her, but she could not help watching him as he lay among the hay. His wide hat set off his bronzed face, which, though not handsome, was pleasant and reassuring—she felt that was the best word—to look at. The dusty shirt and old blue trousers accentuated the long, clean lines of his figure, and she realized, with a touch of anger, that his mere physical perfection, his strength and suppleness, appealed to her. This was an almost repugnant thing, a feeling to be judiciously checked, but it would obtrude itself. After all, in spite of her fastidiousness, she was endowed with most of the characteristics of flesh and blood.

“ You must have a good deal to look after alone,” she remarked.

“ Oh, yes,” said Wyllard ; “ I’m making my biggest effort this year. We’ve sown at least a third more than I’ve ever done before, and I’ve bought a big bunch of horses, too. If all goes satisfactorily we should reap a record harvest, but in the meanwhile the thing’s rather a pull. One can’t let up a minute ; there’s always something to be done, and a constant need for supervision.”

“ Suppose you neglected the latter ? ”

Wyllard smiled. “ Then I’m ’most afraid there’d be the biggest kind of smash.”

After that they talked of other matters of no moment, for both were conscious of the necessity for reticence ; and when they reached the homestead Agatha joined Mrs. Hastings, while Wyllard pitched the hay off the wagon. He came in to supper presently with about half of the others, and they all sat down together in the long, barely furnished room. Wyllard seemed unusually animated, and drew Mrs. Hastings into a brisk exchange of witty banter, but he looked up sharply when, by and by, a beat of hoofs rose from the prairie.

"Somebody's riding in ; I wonder what he wants ? " he said. " I certainly don't expect anybody."

The drumming of hoofs rang more sharply through the open windows, for the sod was hard and dry. Then it broke off, and Agatha saw Wyllard start as a man came into the room. He was a thick-set man with a weather-darkened face, dressed in old blue serge, and he looked and walked like a seaman. In another moment or two he stood still, glancing about him, and Wyllard's lips set tight. A thrill of disconcertion ran through Agatha, for she knew what this stranger's errand must be.

Then Wyllard rose, and walked towards the man with outstretched hand.

" Sit right down and get some supper. You'll want it if you have ridden in from the railroad," he said. " We'll talk afterwards."

The stranger nodded. " I'm from Vancouver," he answered ; " had a lot of trouble tracing you."

He sat down, and Wyllard, who sent a man out to take his horse, went back to his seat, but he was silent during the rest of the meal. When it was over he asked Mrs. Hastings to excuse him, and leading the stranger into a smaller room, pulled out two chairs and laid a cigar box on the table.

" Now you can get ahead," he said.

The seaman fumbled in his pocket, and taking out a slip of wood handed it to his companion.

" That's what I came to bring you," he announced.

Wyllard's eyes grew very grave as he gazed at the thing. It was a slip of willow which will grow close up to the limits of the eternal ice, and it bore a rude representation of the British ensign, union down, which signifies " In distress." Besides this there were one or two indecipherable words scratched on it, and three common names rather more clearly cut. Wyllard recognized every one of them.

"How did you get it?" he asked, in tense suspense.

The sailor once more felt in his pocket and took out a piece of paper cut from a chart. He flattened it out on the table, and it showed, as Wyllard had expected, a strip of the Kamtchatkan coast.

"I guess I needn't tell you where that is," he began, pointing to the parallel of latitude that ran across it. "Dunton gave it me. He was up there late last season well over on the western side. A northeasterly gale fell on them, and took most of the foremast out of her. I understand they tried to lash on a boom or something as a jury mast, but it hadn't height enough to set much forward canvas, and that being the case she wouldn't bear more than a three-reefed mainsail. Anyway, they couldn't do anything with her on the wind, and as it kept heading them from the east she sidled away down south through the Kuriles into the Yellow Sea. They got ice-bound somewhere, which explains why Dunton only fetched Vancouver a week ago."

"But the message?"

"When they were in the thick of their troubles they hove her to not far off the beach with ice about, and a Husky came down on them in some kind of a boat."

"A Husky?" said Wyllard, who knew he meant an Eskimo.

"That's what Dunton called him, but I guess he must have been a Chatkadale or a Koriak. Anyway, he brought this strip of willow, and he had Tom Lewson's watch. Dunton traded him something for it. They couldn't make much of what he said except that he'd got the message from three white men somewhere along the beach. They couldn't make out how long ago."

"Dunton tried for them?"

"How could he? She'd hardly look at the wind,

and the ice was piling up on the coast close to lee of him. He hung on a week or two with the floes driving in all the while, and then it freshened hard and blew him out."

He had told his story, and Wyllard, who rose, stood leaning on his chair-back very grim in face.

"That," he said, "must have been eight or nine months ago."

"It was. They've been up there since the night we lost the boat."

"It's unthinkable," exclaimed Wyllard. "The thing can't be true."

His companion gravely produced a little common metal watch made in Connecticut, and worth some five or six dollars. Opening it he pointed to a name scratched inside it.

"You can't get over that," he said simply.

Wyllard strode up and down the room, and when he sat down again with a clenched hand laid upon the table, he and the sailor looked at each other steadily for a moment or two. Then the stranger made a gesture.

"You sent them," he said, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going for them."

The sailor smiled. "I knew it would be that. You'll have to start right away if it's to be done this season. I've my eye upon a schooner."

He lighted a cigar, and settled himself more comfortably in his seat. "Well," he added, "I'm coming with you, but you'll have to buy my ticket to Vancouver. It cleaned me out to get here. We had a difficulty with a gunboat last season, and the boss went back on me. Sealing's not what it used to be. Anyway, we can fix the thing up later. I won't keep you from your friends."

Wyllard went out and left him, and though he did

not see Mrs. Hastings then, he came upon Agatha sitting outside the house. She glanced at his face when he sat down beside her.

"Ah," she said, "you have had the summons."

Wyllard nodded. "Yes," he replied, "that man was the skipper of a schooner I once sailed in. He has come to tell me where those three men are."

Then he quietly narrated what he had heard, and the girl was conscious of a thrill.

"You are going up there to search for them?" she said. "Won't it cost you a great deal?"

She saw his face harden as he gazed at the tall wheat, but his expression was resolute.

"Yes," he agreed, "that's a sure thing. Most of my dollars are locked up in this crop, and there's need of constant watchfulness and effort until the last bushel's hauled in to the elevators. It probably sounds egotistical, but now I've got rid of Martial I can't put my hand on any one as fit to see the thing through as I am. Still, I have to go for them. What else could I do?"

"Wouldn't the Provincial Government of British Columbia, or your authorities at Ottawa, take the matter up?"

Wyllard's smile was somewhat grim. "It wouldn't be wise to give them an opportunity. For one thing, they've had enough of sealing cases, and that isn't astonishing. We'll say they applied for the persons of three British subjects who are supposed to be living somewhere in Russian Asia—and, for that matter I couldn't be sure that two of them aren't Americans—the Russians naturally inquire what the men were doing there. The answer is that they were poaching the Russians' seals. Then the affair on the beach comes up, and there's a big claim for compensation and trouble all round. The last thing those men—they're practically outlaws—would desire would be to have a

Russian expedition sent on their trail. They would sooner lie hidden until they could somehow get off again."

"But how have they lived up there? The whole land's frozen, isn't it, most of the year?"

"They'd sealing rifles, and the Koriaks make out farther north in their roofed-in pits. One can live on seal and walrus meat and blubber."

Agatha shivered. "But they'd no tents, or furs, or blankets. It's dreadful to imagine it."

"Yes," said Wyllard, gravely, "that's why I'm going for them."

Agatha sat silent a moment. She could realize the magnitude of the sacrifice he was making, and in some degree the hazards that he must face. It appealed to her with an overwhelming force, but she was also conscious of a strange dismay. Then she turned to him with a flush of colour in her cheeks and her eyes shining.

"Oh," she said, "it's splendid!"

Wyllard smiled. "What could I do?" he asked, "I sent them."

Then, to Agatha's relief, Mrs. Hastings came out of the house, and Wyllard went towards the stable to bring out her team.

CHAPTER XIV

AGATHA PROVES OBDURATE

It was two days later when Agatha, coming back from a stroll across the prairie with the two little girls, found Mrs. Hastings awaiting her at the homestead door.

"I'll take the kiddies. Harry Wyllard's here, and he seems anxious to see you, though I don't know what he wants," she said.

She flashed a searching glance at the girl, whose

face, however, remained expressionless. It was not often that Agatha's composure broke down.

"Anyway," she added, "you had better go in. Allen has been arguing with him the last half-hour, and can't get any sense into him. The man's crazy, I think, but he might, perhaps, listen to you."

"That's scarcely probable," Agatha answered quietly.

"Then," said her companion, "it's a pity. But, if he speaks to you about his project you can tell him that it's altogether unreasonable."

She drew aside, and Agatha walked into the room in which she had had one painful interview with Gregory. Wyllard, who was sitting there, rose as she came in, and half-consciously she contrasted him with her lover. Then what Mrs. Hastings had once predicted came about, for Gregory did not bear that comparison favourably. Wyllard, who stood quietly watching her, was the first to break the silence.

"Nellie Hastings or her husband has been telling you what they think of my idea?" he said.

Agatha admitted it. "Yes," she said. "Their opinion evidently hasn't much weight with you."

"I wouldn't go so far as that, but you might have gone farther than you did. Haven't you a message for me?" Then he smiled before he added, "You were sent to denounce my folly—and you can't do it. If you trusted your own impulses you would give me your benediction instead."

Agatha, who was troubled with a sense of regret, noticed a suggestive wistfulness in his face.

"No," she said slowly, "I can't denounce it. For one reason, I have no right of any kind to force my views on you."

"You told Nellie Hastings that?"

It seemed an unwarranted question, but the girl answered it candidly.

"In one sense I did. I hinted that there was no reason why you should listen to me."

Wyllard smiled again. "Nellie and her husband are good friends of mine, but sometimes our friends are a little too officious. Anyway, it doesn't count. If you had had that right, you would have told me to go."

Agatha felt the warm blood rise to her cheeks. He had paid her a great and sincere compliment in taking it for granted that if she had loved him she would still have bidden him undertake his perilous duty.

"Ah," she said, "I don't know. Perhaps I should not have been brave enough."

It was not a judicious answer. She realized that, but she felt that she must speak with unhesitating candour.

"After all," she added, "can you be sure that this thing is your duty?"

"No," he said, "I can't. In fact, when I sit down to think I can see a dozen reasons why it doesn't concern me. In a case of this kind that's always possible. It's just borne in upon me—I don't know how—that I have to go."

Agatha crossed to the window and sat down. She knew there was more to follow, and it was advisable to secure whatever there might be in her favour in a pose of physical ease. Besides, where she stood the glare of light flung back by the white and dusty grass outside struck full upon her face, and she did not want the man to read every varying expression. He leaned upon a chair-back looking at her gravely.

"Well," he said, "we'll go on a little further. It seems better that I should make what's in my mind quite clear to you. You see, Captain Dampier and I start in a week."

Agatha was conscious of a shock of dismay, but the man proceeded quietly. "We may get back this

winter, but it's also likely that we may be ice-nipped before our work is through, and in that case it would be a year at least before we reach Vancouver. In fact, there's a possibility that all of us may leave our bones up there. Now, there's a thing I must ask you. Is it only a passing trouble that stands between you and Gregory? Are you still fond of him?"

The girl felt her heart beating unpleasantly fast.

"It's a point on which I cannot answer you," she said.

"Then I won't insist. The fact that Gregory sent me over for you implied a certain obligation. How far events have relieved me of it I don't know—and you don't seem willing to tell me. But I fancy there is now less cause than there was for me to thrust my own wishes into the background, and, as I leave in another week, the situation has forced my hand. I can't wait as I had meant to do, and it would be a vast relief to know that I had made your future safer than it is before I sail. Will you marry me at the settlement the morning I start?"

Half-conscious, as she was, of the unselfishness which had prompted this suggestion, Agatha turned and faced him in hot anger.

"Can you suppose for a moment that I would agree to that?" she asked.

"Wait," said the man gravely. "Try to look at it calmly. First of all, I want you. You know that—though you have never shown me any tenderness, you can't doubt it—but I can't stay to win your liking. I must go away. Now, as things stand, your future is uncertain; and as my wife it [would, at least, be safer. However badly the man I leave in charge of the Range may manage there would be something saved out of the wreck, and I should like to make that something yours. As I said, I may be away a year, perhaps even longer, and I may

never come back. If I don't, the fact that you would bear my name could cause you no great trouble. You would be provided for, and as free as you are now."

Agatha looked him steadily in the eyes, and spoke as she felt. "We can't contemplate your not coming back. It's unthinkable."

"Thank you," Wyllard answered, still with the quietness she wondered at. "Then I'm not sure that my turning up again would greatly complicate the thing. There would, at least, be one way out of the difficulty. You wouldn't find the situation intolerable if I could make you fond of me."

The girl broke into a high-strung laugh that had a tinge of bitterness in it.

"Oh," she said, "aren't you taking too much for granted? Am I really to believe you are making this fantastic offer seriously? Do you suppose I would marry you—for your possessions?"

"It sounds bloodless? Perhaps it is in one way, but you wouldn't always find me that. Just now, because my hand is forced, I am only anticipating things. If I live, you will some day have to choose between me and Gregory. In that case he must hold his own if he can."

"Against what you have offered me?" She flung the question at him.

He looked at her with his face set and the signs of restraint very plain on it.

"I expect I deserved that. I wanted to make you safe. It's the most pressing difficulty."

The bitterness was still in the girl's eyes.

"So far as I am concerned, you seem to believe it is the only one." Then her anger seemed to carry her away. "Oh," she cried, "do you imagine that an offer of the kind you have made me, made as you have made it, would lead any one to love you?"

Wyllard smiled. "When I first saw your picture, and when I saw you afterwards, I loved your gracious quietness. Now you seem to have got rid of it, I love you better as you are. There is, however, one thing I must ask, and I think I'm entitled to expect the truth. Are you fonder of Gregory than you feel you ever could be of me?"

Agatha's eyes fell. She could not look at him, nor could she answer his question honestly, as she almost wished to.

"I am bound to him until he releases me."

"Ah," said Wyllard, "that is what I was most afraid of. All along it hampered me, and in it you have the explanation of my bloodlessness. It is another reason why I should go away."

"For fear that you should tempt me from my duty?"

The man's expression changed, and there crept into his eyes a gleam of the passion of which she knew he was capable.

"My dear," he said, "I seem to know that I could make you break faith with that man. You belong to me. For three years you have been everywhere with me, but we will let that pass. I must go away, and Gregory will have a clear field, but the probability is in favour of my coming back again, and then, if he has failed to make the most of it, I'll enforce my claim."

He moved and seized one of her hands, holding it strongly against her will.

"That is my last word. At least, you will let me think that when I go up yonder into the mists and snow, I shall take your good wishes for my success away with me."

She lifted her face, which was flushed, and once more looked him steadily in the eyes.

"They are yours, most fervently," she said. "It would be intolerable that you should fail."

He smiled very gravely, and let her hand fall. "After all," he said, "one can only do what one can."

Then he went out without another glance at her, and not long afterwards Mrs. Hastings, who was gifted with a reasonable measure of curiosity, found occasion to enter the room.

"You have said something to trouble Harry?" she began.

Agatha contrived to smile. "I'm not sure he's greatly troubled. In any case, I told him—for the second time—I would not marry him."

"He has given up his crazy notion, then?"

"He never suggested doing that."

Mrs. Hastings indicated compassionate astonishment.

"Oh," she said, "he's mad."

"I believe I told him he was bloodless—at any rate, that was how he interpreted what I said."

Mrs. Hastings laughed. "Harry Wyllard bloodless! My dear, can't you see that the restraint he now and then practises is the sign of a tremendous vitality? But, the man's mad. Did he tell you that he means to leave Gregory in charge of Willow Range?"

Agatha was amazed at this, but Mrs. Hastings nodded. "It's a fact," she declared. "He asked Gregory to meet him here to save time, and"—she turned towards the window—"there's his wagon now."

She moved towards the door, and then turned again. "Is there any blood—red blood we will call it—or even common sense in you? You could have kept that man here if you had wanted."

"No," said Agatha, "I don't think I could. I'm not even sure that if I'd had the right I would have done it."

Mrs. Hastings looked at her curiously. "Then,"

she said, "you have either a somewhat extraordinary character, or are in love with him in a way that is beyond most of us. In any case, you will be sorry for what you have done some day."

Next moment the door closed with a bang, and Agatha was left alone to analyse her sensations during her interview with Wyllard, which was difficult, for they had been confused and fragmentary. She had been angry with him, but the cause for this was less apparent, though there were half-sufficient explanations. For one thing, it was almost intolerable to feel that he had taken it for granted that the greater security she would enjoy as his wife would appeal to her, though there was comfort in the reflection that to leave her dependent upon Mrs. Hastings caused him concern. For another thing, his reserve had been perplexing, and it was borne in upon her that it would have cost her a more determined effort to withstand him had he spoken with fire and passion. The restraint had been evident, and he could not have practised it unless there had been something to hold in check; and then it became apparent that it was more important to ascertain his motives than her own.

If the man had been fervently in love with her, why had he not insisted on that fact. Could it have been because he had, with the fantastic generosity of which he was capable, been willing to leave his comrade unhandicapped with an open field? That seemed too much to expect from any man. Then there was the other explanation that he preferred to leave the choice wholly to her lest he should tempt her too strongly to break faith with Gregory, which brought the blood to her face as it had done already, since it suggested that he had only to urge her sufficiently and she would yield. There was, it seemed, no satisfactory explanation at all. Only the fact

remained that he had made her a dispassionate offer of marriage, and had left her to decide, which she had done.

As it happened, Wyllard could not just then have made the matter very much clearer. Shrewdly practical, as he was in some respects, there were times when he acted blindly, merely doing without reasoning what he felt was right. This had more than once involved him in disaster, but it is fortunate that there are others like him, for in the long run the failures of such men prove better than the dictates of calculating wisdom.

In any case, Agatha found a momentary relief from her thoughts as she watched Hawtrey get down from his wagon and approach the house. The change in him was plainer than it had ever been, which may have been because she had now a standard of comparison. He was tall and well-favoured, and he moved with a jaunty and yet not ungraceful swing; but it almost looked to her as if this were merely the result of an empty self-sufficiency. He was smiling, and for some reason his smile appeared a trifle meaningless, while there was a hint of sensuousness in his face. It suggested that the man might sink into self-indulgent coarseness. But she remembered that she was still pledged to him, and brushed these thoughts aside, until she heard his footsteps inside the house, when she became possessed of a burning curiosity as to what Wyllard had to say to him, which, however, remained unsatisfied.

In the meanwhile, Hawtrey entered a room where Wyllard sat awaiting him with a paper in his hand.

"I asked you to drive over here because it would save time," he said. "I have to go in to the railroad at once. Here's a draft of the scheme I suggested. You had better tell me if there's anything you're not quite satisfied with."

He threw the paper on the table, and Hawtreys, who took it up, perused it.

"I'm to farm and generally manage the Range on your behalf," he said. "My percentage to be deducted after harvest. I'm empowered to sell out grain or horses as appears advisable, and to have the use of teams and implements for my own place when occasion requires it."

He looked up. "I've no fault to find with the thing, Harry. It's generous."

"Then you had better sign it, and we'll get Hastings to witness it in a minute or two. In the meanwhile there's a thing I have to ask you. How do you stand in regard to Miss Ismay?"

Hawtreys pushed his chair back noisily. "That," he said, "is a subject on which I'm naturally not disposed to give you any information. How does it concern you?"

"In this way. Believing that your engagement must be broken off, I asked Miss Ismay to marry me."

Hawtreys was obviously startled, but in a moment later he smiled.

"Of course," he said, "she wouldn't. As a matter of fact, our engagement isn't broken off. It's merely extended."

They looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, and there was a significant hardness in Wyllard's eyes. Then Hawtreys spoke again.

"In view of what you have just told me, why did you want to put me, of all people, in charge of the Range?" he asked.

"I'll be candid," said Wyllard. "For one thing, you held on when I was slipping off the trestle that day in British Columbia. For another, you'll make nothing of your own holding, and if you run the Range as it ought to be run, it will put a good many dollars

into your pocket, besides relieving me of a big anxiety. If you're to marry Miss Ismay, I'd sooner she was made reasonably comfortable."

Hawtrey looked up with a flush in his face.

"Harry," he said, "this is extravagantly generous."

"Wait," said Wyllard; "there's a little more to be said. I can't be back before the frost, and I may be away twelve months. While I am away you will have a clear field—and you must make the most of it. If you are not married when I come back, I shall ask Miss Ismay again. Now"—and he glanced at his comrade steadily—"does this stand in the way of you're going on with the arrangement we have arrived at?"

There was a tense silence for a while, and then Hawtrey broke it.

"No," he said. "After all, there is no reason why it should do so. It has no bearing upon the other question."

Wyllard rose. "Well," he said, "if you call Allen Hastings in we'll get this thing fixed up."

The document was duly signed, and a few minutes later Wyllard drove away; but Mrs. Hastings contrived to have a few words with Hawtrey before he, too, left.

"I've no doubt that Harry took you into his confidence on a certain point," she said.

"Yes," admitted Hawtrey; "he did. I was astonished, besides feeling sorry for him. There is, however, reason to believe that he'll soon get over it."

"You feel sure of that?" and Mrs. Hastings smiled.

"Isn't it evident? If he had cared much about her, he wouldn't have gone away."

"You mean you wouldn't?"

"No," said Hawtrey, "there's no doubt of that."

His companion smiled again. "Well," she said dryly, "I would like to think you were right about Harry."

Hawtrey, who said nothing further, presently drove away, and soon after he did so Agatha approached Mrs. Hastings.

"There's something I must ask you," she said. "Has Gregory consented to take charge of Wyllard's farm?"

"He has," her companion replied in her driest tone.

Agatha's face flushed, and there was a flash in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, "it's almost insufferable!"

Then she turned and left her companion without another word.

She only saw Wyllard once again, and that was when he called at the homestead early one morning. He got down from the wagon, where Dampier sat, and shook hands with her and Allen and Mrs. Hastings. Very few words were spoken, and she could not remember what she said, but when he swung himself up again, and the wagon jolted into the white prairie, she went back to the house with beating heart and a well-nigh intolerable burden of depression.

CHAPTER XV

A DELICATE ERRAND

THERE was sharp frost outside, and the prairie was white with a thin sprinkle of snow, when a little party sat down to supper in the Hastings homestead, one Saturday evening. Hastings sat at the head of the table, his wife at the foot with her little daughters, Agatha, Sproatly, and Winifred between them.

The latter two had just driven over from the railroad settlement, as they did now and then, which explained why the meal, which is usually served early in the evening, had been delayed an hour or so. The two hired men, whom Mrs. Hastings had not kept waiting, had gone out to some task in the barn or stables.

By and by Sproatly took a bundle of papers out of his pocket and laid them on the table. There had been a remarkable change in his appearance of late, for he was neatly dressed, and the skin coat he had taken off when he came in was, as his hostess had noticed, a new one. She thought there was a significance in this, though Sproatly had changed his occupation, and now drove about the prairie on behalf of a firm that made agricultural implements.

"I called for your mail and Gregory's before we left," he said. "I had to go round to see him, which is partly what made us so late, though Winifred couldn't get away as soon as she expected. They've floods of wheat coming in to the elevators, and I understand that the milling people can hardly store another bushel."

Mrs. Hastings glanced at Agatha, who understood what she meant, for Sproatly had hitherto spoken of Winifred circumspectly as Miss Rawlinson. Hastings, however, took the papers which Agatha handed him, and laid them aside.

"We'll let them wait until supper's over. I don't expect any news that's particularly good," he said. "The bottom's apparently dropping out of the wheat market."

"Hamilton can't get cars enough, and we'll have to shut down in another day or two unless they turn up," said Winifred. "It's much the same all along the line. The Winnipeg traffic people wired us they haven't an empty car in the yards. Why do you

rush the grain in that way? It's bound to break the market."

Hastings smiled. "Well," he said, "a good many of us have bills to meet. For another thing, they've had a heavy crop in Manitoba, Dakota, and Minnesota, and I suppose some folks have an idea they'll get in first before the other people swamp the Eastern markets. I think they're foolish. It's a temporary scare, and prices will stiffen by and by."

"That's what Hamilton says, but I suppose the thing is natural. Men are very like sheep, aren't they?"

Hastings laughed. "Yes," he admitted, "we are, in some respects. When prices break, we generally rush to sell. But one or two of my neighbours are holding on, and it's hardly likely that very much of my wheat will be flung on to a falling market."

"We have been getting a good deal from the Range."

There was displeasure in Hastings' face. "Gregory's selling largely on Harry's account."

"They've been hauling wheat in to us for the last few weeks," said Winifred.

Hastings, as Agatha noticed, glanced at his wife significantly, but she interposed and forbade any further conversation of the kind until supper was over, while when the table had been cleared, Hastings opened his papers. The rest sat expectantly silent, while he turned them over one after another.

"No," he said, "there's no news of Harry, and I'm afraid it's scarcely possible that we'll hear anything of him this winter."

Agatha was conscious that Mrs. Hastings' eyes were upon her, and she sat very still. Hastings went on again.

"*The Colonist* has a line or two about a barque from Alaska, which put into Victoria short of stores,"

he said. "She was sent up to an A.C.C. factory, and had to clear out before she was ready. The ice, it seems, was closing in unusually soon. A steam whaler at Portland reports the same thing, and, from the news brought by a steamer from Japan, communication with North-Eastern Asia is already cut off."

None of the others said anything, and Agatha, leaning back in her chair, glanced round the room. There was not much furniture in it, but, though this was unusual on the prairie, door and double casements were guarded by heavy hangings. The big brass lamp overhead shed down a cheerful light, the birch billets in the stove snapped and crackled noisily, and its pipe, which was far too hot to touch, diffused a drowsy heat. One could lounge beside it contentedly, knowing that the frost was drying the snow to powder outside. That heightened the contrast, for Agatha pictured the little schooner bound fast in the Northern ice, and two or three travel-worn men crouching in a tiny tent buffeted by an Arctic gale. She could see the poles bend, and the tricings strain.

After that, with a sudden transition, her thoughts went back to the early morning when Wyllard had driven away, and every detail of the scene rose up clearly in her mind. She saw him and the stolid Dampier sitting in the wagon, with nothing in their manner to suggest that they were setting out upon a very perilous venture, and she felt his hand close tight upon her fingers, as it had done before the wagon jolted away from the homestead. She could once more see it growing smaller and smaller on the white prairie, until it dipped behind the crest of a low rise, and the beat of hoofs died away. Then, at least, she had realized that he had started on the first stage of a journey which might lead him through

the ice-bound gates of the North to the rest that awaits the souls of the sailormen. She could not, however, imagine him shrinking. Gripping helm, or hauling in the sled traces, he would gaze steadfastly ahead, even if they saw only the passage from this world to the next. Once more, as it had done that morning, a thrill ran through her, and there was pride as well as regret in it. Then she became conscious that Hastings was speaking.

"What took you round by the Gregory's, Jim?" he asked.

"Collecting," said Sproatly, "I sold him a couple of binders earlier in the season, but I couldn't get a dollar out of him." He laughed. "Of course, if it had been anybody else, I'd have stayed until he handed over, but I couldn't press Gregory too hard after quartering myself upon him as I did last winter, though I'm afraid my employers wouldn't appreciate that kind of delicacy."

Mrs. Hastings looked thoughtful. "Gregory should have been able to pay. He thrashed out a moderately good crop."

"About two-thirds of what it should have been, and I've a kind of notion that he has been putting up a mortgage. Interest's heavy. There's another matter. I wonder if you've heard that he's getting rid of two of Harry's hands—I mean Pat and Tom Moran?"

"You're sure of that?" Hastings asked somewhat sharply.

"Tom told me."

Mrs. Hastings leaned forward suddenly in her chair. "Then," she said, "I'm going to drive across on Monday, and have a few words with Gregory. Did Moran tell you that Harry had decided to keep the two of them on throughout the year?"

"He wasn't very explicit, but seemed to feel he

had a grievance against Gregory. Of course, in a way, you can't blame the man. He's in charge, and it isn't in him to carry out Harry's policy. This fall in wheat is getting on his nerves, and in any case he'd probably have held his hand and cut down the crop next year."

"I do blame him," and Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha. "You will understand that there's not much can be done when the snow's upon the ground, and as one result of it the hired man prefers to engage himself for the year. To secure himself from being turned adrift when harvest's over he will frequently make a concession in wages. Now I know Harry intended to keep those two men on, and Tom Moran, who has a half-cleared ranch back somewhere in the bush of Ontario, came out here tempted by higher wages. He had to raise a few dollars or give the place up, and he left his wife behind. A good many of the small men can't live upon their holdings all the while. Well, I'm going over on Monday to tell Gregory he must keep them, and you're coming with me."

Agatha said nothing. In the first place, she knew that if Mrs. Hastings had made up her mind, she would gain nothing by objecting, and in addition to this she was conscious of a desire to go. It appeared in some respects an unreasonable wish, but she felt deep down in her that if Wyllard had let the men understand that he would not dismiss them, the promise, implied or explicit, must be redeemed. He would not have attempted to release himself from it—she was sure of that—and it was intolerable that another should be permitted to do anything that would unfavourably reflect on him. Then, to her gratification, Hastings started another topic.

"You have sold a few binders and harrows one way or another, haven't you, Jim?" he said.

Sproatly laughed. "I have," he answered. "As I told the Company's Western representative some time ago, a man who could sell patent medicine to the folks round here could do a good trade in anything. He admitted that my contention sounded reasonable, but I didn't wear smart clothes then, and he seemed very far from sure of me. Anyway, he gave me a show, and now I've got two or three quite complimentary letters from the firm. They've added a few dollars to my salary, and hint that it's possible they may put me in charge of an implement store."

"And you're satisfied?"

"Well," said Sproatly, with an air of reflection, "in some respects, I suppose I am. In others, the thing's galling. You have to report whom you've called upon, and, if you couldn't do business, why they bought somebody else's machines. If you can't get a farmer to take you in you have to put up at an hotel. There's no more camping in a birch bluff under your wagon. Besides, you have to wear store clothes."

Hastings glanced at Winifred, and Agatha fancied she understood what was in his mind.

"Some folks would sooner sleep in an hotel," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Then," said Sproatly, decisively, "they don't know very much. They're the kind of men who'd spend an hour every morning putting their clothes on, and they haven't found out that there's no comfort in any garment until you've had to sew two or three flour bag patches on to it. Then think of the splendid freeness of the other thing. You make your supper when you want, and just how you like it, when you put up in a bluff, and no tea tastes as good as the kind you drink with the wood smoke in it out of a blackened can. You can hear the birch

leaves and the grasses whispering about you when you lie down at night, and you drive on in the glorious freshness—just when it pleases you—when morning comes. Now the Company have the whole route and programme plotted out for me. They write me letters demanding in a most peremptory manner why I haven't done this or that."

Winifred looked at him sharply. "Civilization," she said, "implies responsibility. You can't live just how you like without it being detrimental to the community."

"Oh yes," said Sproatly with a rueful air, "it implies no end of giving up. You have to fall into line, and that's why I kept outside it as long as I could. I don't like standing in a rank, and," he glanced down at his clothing, "I've an inborn objection to wearing uniform."

Agatha laughed as she caught Hastings' eye. She fancied that Sproatly would be sorry for his candour afterwards, but she understood what he was feeling to some extent. It was a revolt against cramping customs and conventionalities, and she partly sympathized with it, though she knew that such revolts are dangerous. Even in the West, those who cannot lead must march in column with the rank and file or bear the consequences of their futile mutiny. It is a hard truth that no man can live as he pleases.

"Restraint," said Winifred, "is a wholesome thing, but it's one most of the men I have met are singularly deficient in. That's why they can't be left alone but must be driven, as they are, in companies. It's their own fault if they now and then find it humiliating."

There was a look in her eyes at which Sproatly apparently took warning, for he said no more upon that subject, and they talked about other matters until he took his departure an hour or two later. It

was next afternoon when he appeared again, and he and Winifred drove away together.

"Thirty miles is a long way to drive in the frost. I suppose you have noticed that she calls him Jim?" Mrs. Hastings remarked. "Anyway, there's a good deal of genuine ability in that young man. He isn't altogether wild."

"His appearance suggested it when I first met him," said Agatha with a laugh. "Was it a pose?"

"No," said her companion reflectively. "I think one could call it a reaction, and it's probable that some very worthy people in the Old Country are to blame for it. Sproatly is not the only young man who has suffered from having too many rules and formalities crammed down his throat. In fact, they're rather plentiful."

Agatha said nothing further, for the little girls appeared just then, and it was not until the next afternoon that she and Mrs. Hastings were alone together again. Then as they drove across the prairie, wrapped in the heavy wagon robes, her companion spoke of the business they had in hand.

"Gregory must keep those men," she said. "There's no doubt that Harry meant to do so, and it would be horribly unfair to turn them loose now when there's absolutely nothing going on. Besides, Tom Moran is a man I'm specially sorry for. As I told you, he left a young wife and a child behind him when he came out here."

"One wonders why he did it," said Agatha.

"He had to. There seems to be a notion in the Old Country that we earn our dollars easily, but it's horribly wrong. We'll take that man's case as an example. He has a small desolate holding up in the bush of Ontario, a hole chopped out of the forest studded all over with sawn-off fir-stumps, with a two-roomed log shack on it. There isn't a settle-

ment within two or three leagues of the spot. Now, as a rule, a place of that kind won't produce enough to keep a man for several years after he has partially cleared it, and unless he can earn something in the meanwhile he must give it up. Moran got heavily into debt with the nearest storekeeper, and had to choose between selling the place or coming here where wages are higher. Well, you can imagine what it must be to the woman who stayed behind in the bush, seeing nobody for weeks together, though she'd bear it uncomplainingly, believing that her husband would come back with enough to clear the debt."

Agatha could imagine it, and indignation against Gregory crept into her heart. She had once liked to think of him as pitiful and chivalrous, and now, it seemed, he was willing that this woman should make her sacrifice in vain.

"But why have you taken the trouble to impress this on—me?" she asked.

Her companion smiled. "I want you to plead that woman's cause. Gregory may do gracefully what you ask him, which would be much the nicest way out of it."

"The nicest way?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Hastings. "But there is another one. Gregory is going to keep Tom Moran, anyway. Harry has one or two friends in this neighbourhood who feel it more or less of an obligation on them to maintain his credit."

Agatha felt the blood rise to her face, but it was not her companion she was angry with. It was an unpleasant thing to admit, but she fancied that Gregory might yield to judicious pressure when he would not be influenced by either compassion or a sense of equity. It also flashed upon her that had Mrs. Hastings believed she still retained any tender-

ness for the man, she would not have spoken as she had done. The whole situation was embarrassing, but there was courage in her.

"Well," she said simply. "I will speak to him."

They said nothing more until they approached the Range, and as they drove by the outbuildings, Agatha glanced about her curiously. The homestead did not look quite the same as it was when Wyllard had been there. A wagon stood near the straw-pile without one wheel. A door of the barn hung awkwardly open, and plainly needed mending, and the snow had blown inside the building. There was a gap in the side of one sod and pole structure which should evidently have been repaired, and several other things besides jarred upon her. They spoke of slackness and indifference. Then she saw Mrs. Hastings purse her lips up.

"There is a change in the place already," she said.

They got down in another minute or two, and when they entered the house, the grey-haired Swedish woman greeted them with a moody air. She noticed the glance Mrs. Hastings cast around her, and her manner became deprecatory.

"I can't keep things straight now. It is not the same," she exclaimed.

Mrs. Hastings asked if Hawtrey was in, and hearing that he was, turned to Agatha. "Go along and talk to him. I've something to say to Mrs. Nansen."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRIOR CLAIM

It was with confused feelings, among which a sense of repugnance predominated, that Agatha walked towards Hawtrey's room. She was not one of the women who take pleasure in pointing out an-

other person's duty, for while she had discovered that this task is an easy one to some people, she was aware that a duty looks and is much more burdensome when it is laid upon one's self. Indeed, she was conscious that one might be shortly thrust upon her which she would find it very hard to bear, and she became troubled with compunction as she remembered how she had persistently driven all thought of it out of her mind.

There was no doubt that she was still pledged to Gregory, and that she had loved him once. Both facts must be admitted, and if he insisted, she must marry him. She possessed an innate sense of right and honesty, and realized that the fact that he was not the man she had once imagined him to be did not release her. On the other hand, if he were about to commit a cruel and unjustifiable action, she was the one person of all others whose part it was to restrain him.

The colour was plainer in her face than usual when she entered the room where he lay, pipe in hand, in a lounge chair, and—for he did not immediately notice her—his attitude of languid ease irritated her. There were, as she had seen, several things which had some claim on his attention outside. A litter of letters and papers lay upon a table near him. Then he rose, and came forward with outstretched hand.

"I didn't hear you," he said. "This is a pleasure I scarcely anticipated."

Agatha sat down in the chair he drew out for her near the stove, and he noticed that she glanced at the papers on the table, for he laughed.

"Bills, and things of that kind. They've been worrying me for a week or two," he said. Then he seized the litter, and bundling it together flung it into an open drawer, which he shut with a snap.

"Anyhow, that's the last of them for to-day. I'm awfully glad you drove over."

Agatha smiled. The action was so characteristic of the man. She had once found no fault with Gregory's careless habits, and his way of thrusting a difficulty into the background and making light of it had appealed to her. It had suggested his ability to straighten out the trouble when it appeared advisable. Now, she thought, she must not be absurdly hypercritical, and he had, as it happened, given her the lead she desired.

"I should have fancied that you would have given them more attention, as wheat is going down," she said.

Hawtreys looked at her with an air of reproach. "It must be nearly three weeks since I have seen you, and now you expect me to talk of farming. If you quite realized the situation it would be about the last thing you would ask me to do."

Agatha was astonished to remember that three weeks had actually elapsed since she had last met him, and they had only exchanged a word or two then. He had certainly not obtruded himself upon her, for which she was grateful.

"Nobody is talking about anything except the fall in prices just now," she persisted. "I suppose it affects you, too?"

The man, who seemed to accept this as a rebuff, looked at her rather curiously, and then laughed.

"I must confess that it does. In fact, I've been acquiring parsimonious habits and worrying myself about expenses lately. They have to be kept down somehow, and that's a thing I never took kindly to."

"You feel it a greater responsibility when you're managing somebody else's affairs?" suggested Agatha, who was still waiting her opportunity.

"Well," said Hawtreys, in whom there was, after

all, a certain honesty, "that's not the only thing that has some weight with me. You see, I'm not altogether disinterested. I get a certain percentage—on the margin—after everything is paid, and I want it to be a big one. Things are rather tight just now, and the wretched mortgage on my place is crippling me."

It had slipped out before he realized what he was saying, and he saw the girl's look of astonishment and concern.

"You are in debt, Gregory? I thought you had, at least, kept clear of that," she said.

"So I did—for a while. In any case, if Wyllard stays away, and I can run this place on the right lines, I shall get out of it again."

She was vexed that he had said this, for it was clear to her that if Wyllard did not return until another crop was gathered in, it would be because he was held fast among the Northern ice in peril of his life. Then another thought struck her. She had never quite understood why Gregory had been willing to undertake the management of the Range, in view of the probability of Wyllard's having told him what he had said to her, but he had made that point clear by admitting that he was burdened with a load of debt, which suggested the question why he had incurred the latter. The answer flashed across her mind, as she remembered having heard Mrs. Hastings or somebody else say that he had spent a good many dollars upon his house and furnishings for it. This caused her a sudden sense of confusion, for, as one result of that expenditure, he had been forced into doing what she fancied must have been a very repugnant thing, and she had never even crossed his threshold.

"When did you borrow that money?" she asked sharply.

There was no doubt that the man was embarrassed, and her heart softened towards him for his hesitation. It was to increase her comfort he had laid that load upon himself, and he was clearly unwilling that she should know of it. That counted for a good deal in his favour.

"Was it just before I came out?" she asked again.

Hawtreys expostulated. "You really mustn't worry me about these matters, Aggy. A good many of us are in the storekeepers' or mortgage-jobbers' hands; but if I have another good year at the Range, I shall clear off the debt."

Agatha turned her face away from him for a moment or two. The thing the man had done placed a heavy obligation on her, and she had only found fault with him. Even then, however, stirred as she was, she knew that all the tenderness she had once felt for him had gone. The duty, however, remained, and with an effort she turned to him again.

"Oh!" she said, "I'm so sorry."

Hawtreys smiled. "I really don't think I deserve a great deal of pity. As I have said, I'll probably come out all right next year if I can only keep expenses down."

Then Agatha remembered the task she had in hand. It was a very inauspicious moment to set about it, but that could not be helped, and even for the man's own sake she must win him over.

"There is one way, Gregory, in which I don't think it ought to be done," she said. "You took over Wyllard's obligations when you took the farm, and I think you should keep on the two Morans."

Hawtreys started. "Ah!" he said, "Mrs. Hastings had been setting you on! I partly expected it."

"She told me," Agatha admitted. "Unless you will look at the thing as I do, I could almost

wish she hadn't. The thought of that woman shut up in the woods all winter, only to find that what she must have to bear has been thrown away, troubles me. Wyllard promised to keep those men on, did he not?"

"There was no regular engagement, so far as I can make out."

"Still, Moran understood that he was to be retained."

"Yes," Hawtrey agreed, "he evidently does. If the market had gone with us, I'd have fallen in with his views. As it hasn't, every man's wages count."

Agatha endeavoured to keep her temper. Of late, Gregory's ideas had offended her too frequently.

"Does that release you?"

Hawtrey did not answer this.

"I'll keep those men, if you want me to," he said.

Agatha winced at this. She had discovered that she must not look for too much from Gregory, but to realize that he had no sense of moral obligation, and could only be influenced to do justice by the expectation of obtaining her favour, hurt her.

"I want them kept on, but I don't want you to do it for that reason," she said. "Can't you grasp the distinction, Gregory?"

A trace of darker colour crept into Hawtrey's face, but he looked at her steadily. He had not thought much about her during the last month, but the faint scorn in her voice stirred him.

"Now," he said, "there are just three reasons, Aggy, why you should have troubled yourself about this thing. You are, perhaps, a little sorry for Moran's wife, but as you haven't even seen her that can hardly count for much. The next is, that you don't care to see me doing what you regard as a shabby thing; perhaps it is a shabby thing in

some respects, but I feel it's justifiable. Of course, if that's your reason there's a sense in which, while not exactly complimentary—it's consoling."

He broke off, and looked at her with a question in his eyes, and it cost Agatha an effort to meet them. She was not prudish, and never paraded her own righteousness, but once or twice after the shock of her disillusionment in regard to him had lessened, she had dreamed of the possibility of endowing him little by little with some of the qualities she had once fancied he possessed, and, as she vaguely thought of it, rehabilitating him. Now, however, the thing seemed impossible, and, what was more, the desire to bring it about had gone. Hateful as the situation was becoming, she was honest, and she could not let him credit her with a motive that had not influenced her.

In the meanwhile, her very coldness and aloofness stirred desire in the man, and she shrank as she saw a spark of passion kindling in his eyes. It was merely passion, for she recognized that there was a strain of grossness in him.

"No," she said, "that reason was not one which had any weight with me."

Hawtreys face hardened. "Then," he retorted grimly, "we'll get on to the third. Wyllard's credit is a precious thing to you; sooner than anything should cast a stain on it you would beg a favour from—me. You have set him on a pedestal, and it would pain you if he came down. Considering everything, it's a remarkable situation."

Agatha grew a trifle pale. Gregory was horribly right, for she had no doubt now that he had merely thrust upon her a somewhat distressing truth. It was to save Wyllard's credit, and for that alone, she had undertaken this most unpalatable task. She did not answer, and Hawtreys stood up.

"Wyllard has his faults, but there's this in his favour—he keeps a promise. One has a certain respect for a person who never goes back upon his word. Well, because I really think he would like it, I'll keep those men."

He paused, as if to let her grasp the drift of this, and then turned to her with something that startled her in his voice and manner. "The question is—are you willing to follow his example?"

Agatha shrank from the glow in his eyes. "Oh!" she broke out, "you cannot urge me now—after what you said."

Hawtrey laughed harshly. "Well," he said, "I'll come for my answer very soon. It seems that you and Wyllard attach a good deal of importance to a moral obligation, and I must remind you that the time we agreed upon is almost up."

Agatha sat very still for a minute or two, while a sense of dismay crept over her. There was no doubt that Gregory's retort was fully warranted. She had, as she admitted, insisted upon his carrying out an obligation which would cost him something, not because she took pleasure in seeing him do what was honourable, but to preserve the credit of another man, and now it was with intense repugnance she recognized that there was no escaping from the one she had incurred. The man's attitude was natural and logical. She had promised to marry him, and he had saddled himself with a load of debt on her account, but the slight pity and compunction she had felt a few minutes earlier had vanished. Indeed, she well-nigh hated him. His face had grown hard and almost brutal, and there was a look in his eyes from which she shrank.

Then she rose.

"Do you wish to speak to Mrs. Hastings?" she asked.

"No," said Hawtreys; "if she'll excuse me, I don't think I do. If you tell her you have been successful, she'll probably be quite content."

Agatha departed without another word, and Hawtreys lighted his pipe and stretched himself out in his chair, when he heard the wagon drive away a few minutes later. He did not like Mrs. Hastings, and had a suspicion that she had no great regard for him, but he confessed to a somewhat grim satisfaction. There was, though it seldom came to the surface, a taint of crude brutality in his nature, and it was active now. When Agatha had first come out the change in her had been a shock to him, and it would have cost him very much to let her go. Since then, however, her coldness and half-perceived disdain had angered him, and the recent interview with her had left him in an unpleasant mood. Though this was, perhaps, the last thing he would have expected, it had provoked him to desire. It was consoling that he could exact the fulfilment of her promise from the girl. His face assumed an even coarser expression as he assured himself of it, but he had, as it happened, never realized the shiftiness and instability of his own character. It was his misfortune that the impulses which swayed him one day had generally changed by the next.

This became apparent when, having occasion to drive in to the elevators on the railroad a week later, he called at a store to make one or two purchases. The storekeeper laid a package on the counter.

"I wonder if you'd take this along to Miss Creighton as a favour," he said. "She wrote for the things, and Elliot was to take them out, but I guess he forgot—anyway, he didn't call."

Hawtreys told the clerk to put the package in his wagon. He had scarcely seen Sally since his re-

covery, and he suddenly remembered that he owed her a good deal, and that she was very pretty. Besides, he could talk to Sally without any of the restraint that Agatha's manner laid on him. Then the storekeeper put an open box upon the counter.

"I guess you're going to be married by and by," he said.

Hawtrey was thinking of Sally, and the question irritated him.

"I don't know that it concerns you, but it's probable," he replied.

"Well," said the storekeeper good-humouredly, "a pair of these mittens would make a nice present for a lady. Smartest thing of the kind I've ever seen here—choicest Alaska fur."

Hawtrey bought a pair, and the storekeeper took a fur cap out of another box.

"Now," he said, "this is just the thing she'd like to go with the mittens. There's style about that cap. Feel the gloss of it."

Hawtrey bought the cap, and smiled as he swung himself up into his wagon. Gloves are not much use in the prairie frost, and mittens, which are not divided into finger-stalls, will within limits fit almost anybody. This was fortunate, because he was not sure that he meant to give them to Agatha.

It was bitterly cold, and the pace the team made was slow, for the snow was loose and too thin for a sled of any kind, which is not very generally used upon the prairie. As the result of this, night had closed down and Hawtrey was frozen almost stiff when at last a birch bluff rose out of the waste in front of him. It cut black against the cold blueness of the sky and the spectral gleam of snow, but when he had driven farther a stream of ruddy orange light appeared in the midst of it. A few minutes later he pulled his team up in front of a log-built house,

and getting down with difficulty saw the door open as he approached it. Sally stood in the entrance silhouetted against a blaze of cheerful light.

"Oh!" she cried. "Gregory!"

Hawtreys recognized the thrill in her voice, and took both her hands, as he had once been in the habit of doing.

"Will you let me in?" he asked.

The girl laughed in a strained fashion. She had been startled, and was not sure yet as to how she should receive him; but in the meanwhile Hawtreys drew her in.

"The old folks are out," she said. "They've gone over to Elliot's for supper. He's bringing us a package."

Hawtreys, who explained that he had got it, let her hands go, and sat down somewhat limply. He had come suddenly out of the bitter frost into the brightly-lighted, stove-warmed room. In another few moments, however, the comfort and cheeriness of it appealed to him.

"This looks very cosy after my desolate room at the Range," he said.

"Then if you'll stay I'll make you supper. I suppose there's nothing to take you home?"

"No," said Hawtreys, with a significant glance at her, "there isn't, Sally. As a matter of fact, I often wish there was."

He saw her look of uncertainty, which was, however, not tinged with embarrassment, and feeling that he had gone far enough in the meanwhile, he went out to put up his team. When he came back there was a cloth on the table, and Sally was busy about the stove. He sat down and watched her attentively. In some respects, he thought, she compared favourably with Agatha. She had a nicely moulded figure, and a lithe gracefulness of pose and

carriage which testified to a strong vitality, while Agatha's bearing was usually characterized by a frigid repose. Then Sally's face was at least as comely in a different way, and there was no reserve in it. She was what he thought of as human, frankly flesh and blood. Her quick smile was, as a rule, provocative and never chilled one as Agatha's quiet glances sometimes did.

"Sally," he declared, "you've grown prettier than ever."

The girl turned partly round towards him with a slow, sinuous movement that he found seductively graceful.

"Now," she expostulated, "you oughtn't to say those things to me."

Hawtrey laughed; he was sure of his ground with Sally.

"Why shouldn't I, when it's just what you are?"

"For one thing, Miss Ismay wouldn't like it."

The man's face hardened. "I'm not sure she'd mind. Anyhow, Miss Ismay doesn't like a good many things I'm in the habit of doing."

Sally, who had watched him closely, turned away again, but a thrill of exultation ran through her. She had first heard him speak of his marriage with dismay, which was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing, and she had fled home in an agony of anger and humiliation. That state of mind had not lasted long, and when the wedding was postponed, she began to wonder whether it was impossible to win back the man. She felt that he belonged to her although he had never given her any very definite claim on him. She was primitive and passionate, but she was determined, and now he had done what she had almost expected him to do, she meant to keep him.

"You have fallen out?" she said, and contrived to veil the anxiety she was conscious of.

The question, and more particularly, the form of it, was unpalatable, but he answered it.

"Oh, no," he said. "As a matter of fact, Sally, you can't fall out nicely with everybody. Now when we fell out you got delightfully angry. I don't know if you were more charming then or when you graciously agreed to make it up again." He laughed. "I almost wish I could make you angry now."

Sally had moved nearer to take a kettle off the stove, and looked down on him with her eyes shining in the lamplight. She realized that she would have to fight Miss Ismay for the man; but there was this in her favour—she appealed directly to one side of his nature, as Agatha, even if she had loved him, would never have done.

"Would you?" she said. "Dare you try?"

"I might if I was tempted hard enough."

She leaned upon the table looking at him mockingly, aware that her pose and expression were wholly provocative. Indeed, she could not have failed to recognize the meaning of the sudden tightening of his lips, though she did not in the least shrink from it. She had not the faintest doubt of her ability to keep him at a due distance if it appeared needful.

"Oh," she cried, "you only say things."

Hawtreys laughed, and stooping down picked up a package he had brought from the store.

"After all, I think I'd rather try if I can please you," he said, opening the package. "Are these things very much too big for you, Sally?"

The girl's eyes glistened at the sight of the mittens he held out. They were very different from the kind she had been in the habit of wearing, and when he carelessly took out the fur cap she broke into a little cry of delight. In the meanwhile, Hawtreys watched her intently. He was not sure he had meant

Sally to have the things when he had purchased them, but he was quite contented now. The one gift he had diffidently offered Agatha since her arrival in Canada had been almost coldly laid aside.

In a few minutes Sally laid out supper, and as she waited upon him daintily or filled his cup, Hawtrey thrust his misgivings farther behind him. Sally could certainly cook. When the meal was over he sat talking about nothing in particular for almost an hour, and then stood up. Sally's mother would be back before very long, and she was a person he had no great liking for.

"Well," he said. "I must be getting home. Won't you let me see you with that cap on?"

Sally, who betrayed no bashfulness, put on the cap, and stood before a dingy mirror with both hands raised while she pressed it down upon her gleaming hair. Then she flashed a smiling glance at him. It was sufficient, and as she turned again, Hawtrey slipped forward as softly as he could. She swung round, however, with a flush in her face and a forceful, restraining gesture.

"Don't spoil it all, Gregory," she exclaimed.

Hawtrey, who saw that she meant it—which was a cause of some astonishment to him—dropped his hand.

"Oh," he said, "if you look at it in that way I'm sorry. Good night, Sally!"

She let him go, but she smiled when he drove away; and half an hour later she showed the cap and mittens to her mother with significant candour. Mrs. Creighton, who was a severely practical person, nodded.

"Well," she said, "he only wants a little managing if he bought you these, and nobody could say you ran after him. I wouldn't, anyhow; some of them don't like it."

CHAPTER XVII

THE FIRST STAKE

A FORTNIGHT had passed since the evening Hawtreys had spent with Sally, when Winifred and Sproatly once more arrived at the Hastings' homestead. The girl was looking jaded, and the manager of the elevator, who had all along treated her with a good deal of consideration, had insisted upon her going away for a few days now the pressure of business which had followed the harvest had slackened. Sproatly, as usual, had driven her in from the settlement.

When the evening meal was over, they drew their chairs close up about the stove, and Hastings thrust fresh birch billets into it, for there was a bitter frost. Mrs. Hastings installed Winifred in a canvas lounge and wrapped a shawl about her.

"You haven't got warm yet, and you're looking worn out," she said. "I suppose Hamilton has been keeping you at work until late at night?"

"We have been very busy since I was last here," Winifred admitted, and then turned to Hastings. "Until a few days ago, there has been no slackening in the rush to sell. Everybody seems to have been throwing wheat on to the market."

Hastings looked thoughtful. "A good many of the smaller men have been doing so, but I think they're foolish. They're only helping to break down prices, and I shouldn't wonder if one or two of the big, long-headed buyers saw their opportunity in the temporary panic. In fact, if I'd a pile of dollars in the bank, I'm not sure that I wouldn't send along a buying order and operate for a rise."

His wife shook her head at him. "No," she said; "you certainly wouldn't while I had any say in the matter. You're a good farmer, but I haven't met one yet who made a successful speculator. Some of

our friends have tried it—and you know where it landed them. I expect those broker and mortgage men must lick their lips when a nice fat woolly farmer comes along. It must be delightful to shear him."

Hastings laughed. "I should like to point out that most of the farmers in this country are decidedly thin, and have uncommonly little wool on them." Then he turned to the rest. "I feel inclined to tell you how Mrs. Hastings made the expenses of her Paris trip; it's an example of feminine consistency. She went round the neighbourhood and bought up all the wheat anybody had on hand, or, at least, she made me do it."

His wife, who had, as it happened, means of her own, nodded. "That was different," she said; "anyway, I had the wheat, and I—knew—it would go up."

"Then why shouldn't other folks sell forward, for instance, when they know it will go down? That's not what I suggested doing, but the point's the same."

"They haven't got the wheat."

"Of course; they wouldn't operate for a fall if they had. On the other hand, if their anticipations proved correct, they could buy it for less than they sold at before they had to deliver."

"That," said Mrs. Hastings severely, "is pure gambling. It's sure to land you in the hands of the mortgage jobber."

Hastings smiled at the others. "As a matter of fact, it not infrequently does, but I want you to note the subtle distinction. The thing's legitimate if you've only got the wheat in a bag. In such a case you must operate naturally for a rise."

"There's a good deal to be said for that point of view," observed Sproatly. "You can keep the

wheat if you're not satisfied, but when you try the other plan the margin which may vanish at any moment is the danger. I suppose Gregory has still been selling the Range wheat, Winifred?"

"I believe we have sent on every bushel."

Sproatly exchanged a meaning look with Hastings, whose face once more grew thoughtful.

"Then," said the latter, "if he's wise he'll stop at that."

Mrs. Hastings changed the subject, and drew her chair closer in to the stove, which snapped and crackled cheerfully.

"It must be a good deal colder where Harry is," she remarked with a shiver.

She flashed a swift glance at Agatha, and saw her expression change, but Sproatly broke in again:

"It was bad enough driving in from the railroad this afternoon. Winifred was almost frozen, which is why I didn't go round by Creighton's for the pattern mat—I think that's what he said it was—Mrs. Creighton borrowed from you. I met him at the settlement a day or two ago."

Mrs. Hastings said he could bring it another time, and while the rest talked of something else Winifred turned to Agatha.

"It really was horribly cold, and I almost fancied one of my hands was frost-nipped," she said. "As it happens, I can't buy mittens like your new ones."

"My new ones?" Agatha exclaimed.

"The ones Gregory bought for you."

"My dear, he never gave me any."

Winifred pursed up her face. "Well," she persisted, "he certainly bought them and a fur cap, too. I was in the store when he did it, though I don't think he noticed me. They were lovely mittens—such a pretty brown fur."

At this point Mrs. Hastings, unobserved by any

of the others, caught Sproatly's eye. His face became suddenly expressionless, and he looked away.

"When was that?" asked Agatha.

"A fortnight ago."

Agatha sat silent, and was glad when Mrs. Hastings asked Winifred a question. She desired no gifts from Gregory, but since he had bought the cap and mittens she wondered what he could have done with them. It was disconcerting to feel that, while he meant to hold her to her promise, he must have given them to somebody else. She had never heard of his acquaintance with Sally Creighton, but it struck her as curious that although the six months had expired some weeks ago, he had neither sent her any word nor called at the homestead.

A few minutes later Mrs. Hastings took up a basket of sewing she had been engaged upon, and moved towards the door. Sproatly, who rose as she approached him, drew aside his chair, and she handed the basket to him.

"You can carry it if you like."

Sproatly took the basket, and followed her into another room, where he set it down.

"Well?" he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Mrs. Hastings regarded him thoughtfully. "I wonder if you know what Gregory did with those mittens?"

"I'm very pleased I can assure you that I don't."

"Do you imagine that he kept them?"

"I haven't an opinion on the point."

"Still, if I said I felt certain he had given them to somebody, you would have an idea who it would probably be?"

"Well," said Sproatly reluctantly. "If you insist upon it, I must admit that I could make a guess."

Mrs. Hastings smiled in a manner which suggested comprehension. "So could I. It wouldn't surprise me if we both guessed right. Now you may as well go back to the others."

Sproatly, who made no answer, turned away, and he was talking to Agatha when, half an hour later, a wagon drew up outside the door. In another minute or two he leaned forward in amused expectancy as Sally walked into the room.

"I'm going on to Lander's, and just called to bring back the mat you lent us," she informed Mrs. Hastings. "Sproatly was to have come for it, but he didn't."

Sproatly, who said he was sorry, fixed his eyes on her. It was clear that Agatha did not understand the situation, but he fancied from her expression that Sally was filled with an almost belligerent satisfaction. She was wearing a very smart fur cap, and carried a pair of new fur mittens which she had just stripped off in one hand. Sproatly, who glanced at them, noticed that Winifred did the same. Then Mrs. Hastings spoke.

"I don't think you have met Miss Ismay, Sally," she said.

Sally merely said that she had not, and Sproatly was aware that the situation was an interesting one, when Mrs. Hastings formally presented her. It was obvious that Agatha was somewhat puzzled by Sally's attitude.

As a matter of fact, Agatha, who said she must have had a cold drive, was regarding the new arrival with a curiosity she had not expected to feel when she first came in. Miss Creighton, she admitted, was comely, though she was clearly somewhat primitive and crude. The long skin coat she wore hid her figure, but her pose was too virile, and there was a look in her eyes which puzzled Agatha. It was almost

openly hostile, and conveyed a hint of triumph. Agatha, who could find no reason for this, resented it.

In the meanwhile, Sally remained standing, and as she said nothing further, an awkward silence ensued. She was the dominant figure in the room, and the others became sensible of a slight embarrassment as she gazed at Agatha with unwavering eyes. In fact, it was a relief when at length she turned to Mrs. Hastings.

"I can't stop. It wouldn't do to leave the team in this frost," she said.

This was so evident that they let her go, and Mrs. Hastings, who accompanied her to the door, afterwards sat down beside Sproatly, apart from the rest.

"You noticed those mittens," she said softly.

"I did," Sproatly confessed. "I think you can rely upon my discretion. If you hadn't wanted this assurance I don't suppose you'd have said anything upon the subject. Probably Winifred noticed them, too."

"Does that mean you're not sure Winifred's discretion is equal to your own?"

Sproatly looked amused. "She has a sincere friendship for Miss Ismay, and, I understand, a poor opinion of Gregory. Of course, I don't know how far your views on that subject coincide with hers."

"Do you expect me to explain them to you?"

"No," said Sproatly, "I'm only anxious to keep out of the thing. Gregory is a friend of mine, and has his good qualities. By the way, Winifred's expression suggests that she's thinking of something."

His companion smiled. "Then I must endeavour to have a word or two with her."

Not long afterwards she and Winifred went out together, while when the others were retiring, she

detained Agatha for a minute or two in the empty room.

"Haven't the six months Gregory gave you run out yet?" she asked.

Agatha said they had.

"He hasn't been over to see you since."

The girl looked troubled, and Mrs. Hastings laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "if he does come you must put him off."

"Why?" Agatha asked, in a low, strained voice.

"For one thing, because we want to keep you," and Mrs. Hastings looked at her with a very friendly smile.

"Are you anxious to make it up with Gregory?"

A shiver ran through the girl. "Oh," she said, "I can't answer that. I must do what is right."

Then, to Agatha's astonishment, her companion stooped and kissed her.

"Most of us, I believe, have that wish, but the thing is often horribly complex," Mrs. Hastings said.

"Anyhow, you must put Gregory off again, if it's only for another month or two. I fancy you will not find it difficult."

She turned away with that, but her manner had been so pointed that Agatha, who did not sleep very well that night, decided that if it was possible she would act on her advice.

In the meanwhile, a very dapper little gentleman, who was interested in land agency and general mortgage business, was spending the evening with Hawtreys in Wyllard's room at the Range. He had driven round by Hawtreys's homestead earlier in the afternoon, and had deduced a good deal from the state of it, though this was a point he kept to himself. Now he lay in a lounge chair beside the stove, smoking one of Wyllard's cigars and unobtrusively

watching his companion. There was a roll of bills in his pocket from which the latter had very reluctantly parted.

"In view of the fall in wheat, it must have been a pull for you to pay me that interest," he said.

"It certainly was," Hawtrey admitted with a dreary smile. "I'm sorry it had to be done."

"I don't see how you made it," continued the other man. "What you got for your wheat couldn't have done much more than cover working expenses."

Hawtrey laughed. He was aware that his companion's profession was not regarded with any great favour by the prairie farmers, but he was never particularly cautious, and he liked the man.

"As a matter of fact, it didn't, Edmonds," he said. "I paid you out of what I get for running this place. The red wheat Wyllard raises generally commands a cent or two a bushel more from the big milling people than anything put on the market round here."

Edmonds agreed. He had without directly requesting him to do so led Hawtrey into showing him round the Range that afternoon, and having of necessity a practical knowledge of farming he had been impressed by all that he had noticed. The farm, which was a big one, had been ably managed until a little while ago, and he felt the strongest desire to get his hands on it. This would have been out of the question had Wyllard been at home, but with Hawtrey, upon whom he had a hold, in charge, the thing appeared by no means impossible.

"I suppose he was reasonably liberal over your salary."

"I don't get one. I take a share of the margin after everything is paid."

Edmonds carefully noted this. He was not sure that such an arrangement would warrant him in

regarding Hawtrey as Wyllard's partner, but he meant to gather more information upon that point by and by.

"If wheat keeps on dropping there won't be any margin at all next year, and that's what I'm inclined to figure on," he said. "There are, however, ways a man with nerve could turn it to account."

"You mean by selling wheat down."

"Yes," said Edmonds, "that's just what I mean. Of course, there is a hazard in the thing. You can never be absolutely sure how the market will go, but the signs everywhere point to still cheaper wheat next year."

"That's your view?"

Edmonds smiled, and took out of his pocket a bundle of market reports.

"Other folks seem to share it in Winnipeg, Chicago, New York, and Liverpool. You can't get behind these stock statistics, though, of course, dead low prices are apt to cut the output."

Hawtrey read the reports carefully. They were all in the same pessimistic strain, though he was not aware that his companion had selected them with a view to the effect he fancied they would produce. Edmonds, who saw the interest in his eyes, leaned towards him confidentially when he spoke again.

"I don't mind admitting that I'm taking a hand in a big bear operation," he said. "It's outside my usual business, but the thing looks almost certain."

Hawtrey grew eager. There was no doubt that the prospect of acquiring dollars by an easier method than toiling in the rain and wind appealed to him.

"If it's good enough for you it should be safe," he said. "The trouble is that I've nothing to put in."

"Then you're not empowered to lay out Wyllard's

money. If that was the case it shouldn't be difficult to pile up a bigger margin than you're likely to do by farming."

Hawtrey started, for the idea had already crept into his mind.

"In a way, I am, but I'm not sure that I'm justified in operating on the market with it."

"Have you the arrangement you made with him in writing?"

Hawtrey opened a drawer, and Edmonds betrayed no sign of satisfaction when he was handed a somewhat informally worded document. He perused it carefully, and it seemed to him that it constituted his companion a partner in the Range.

"Now," he said, "while I naturally can't tell what Wyllard contemplated, this paper certainly gives you power to do anything you think advisable with his money. In any case, I understand that he can't be back until well on in next year."

"I shouldn't expect him until late in the summer, anyway."

There was silence for a moment or two, and during it Hawtrey's face grew a trifle hard. It was unpleasant to look forward to the time when he would be required to relinquish the charge of the Range, and of late he had been wondering how he could make the most of the situation in the meanwhile. Then his companion spoke again.

"It's almost certain that the operation I suggested can only result one way, and it appears most unlikely that Wyllard would raise any trouble if you handed him several thousand dollars over and above what you had made by farming. I can't imagine a man objecting to that kind of thing."

Hawtrey sat still with indecision in his eyes for half a minute, and Edmonds, who was too wise to say anything, leaned back in his chair. Then Haw-

trey turned to the drawer again with an air of sudden resolution.

"I'll give you a cheque for a couple of thousand dollars, which is as far as I care to go just now," he said.

He took a pen, and Edmonds watched him with quiet amusement as he wrote. As a matter of fact, Hawtreys was in one respect, at least, perfectly safe in entrusting the money to him. Edmonds had deprived a good many prairie farmers of their possessions in his time, but he never stooped to any crude trickery. He left that to the smaller fry. Just then he was playing a deep and cleverly thought-out game.

He pocketed the cheque Hawtreys gave him, and then discussed other subjects for half an hour or so until he rose.

"You might ask them to get my team out. I've some business at Lander's and have ordered a room there," he said. "I'll send you a line when there's any change in the market."

CHAPTER XVIII

GREGORY MAKES UP HIS MIND

WHEAT was still being flung on to a lifeless market when Hawtreys walked out of the mortgage jobber's place of business in the railroad settlement one bitter afternoon. He had a big roll of paper money in his pocket, and was feeling particularly pleased with himself, for prices had steadily fallen since he had joined in the bear operation Edmonds had suggested, and the result of it had proved eminently satisfactory. This was why he had just given the latter a further draft on Wyllard's bank, with instructions to sell

wheat down on a considerably more extensive scale. He meant to operate in earnest now, which was exactly what the broker had anticipated, but in this case he had decided to let Hawtrey operate alone. Indeed, being an astute and far-seeing man, he had gone so far as to hint that caution might be advisable, though he had at the same time been careful to show Hawtrey only those market reports which had a distinctly pessimistic tone. Edmonds was disposed to agree with the men who looked forward to a reaction before very long.

Hawtrey glanced about him as he strode down the street. It was wholly unpaved, and rutted deep, but the drifted snow had partly filled the hollows, and it did not look very much rougher than it would have done if somebody had recently driven a plough through it. A rude plank pavement ran along both sides of it, raised a foot or two above the ground so that foot-passengers might escape the mire of the thaw in spring, and immediately behind the pavement squat, weatherbeaten, frame houses, all of much the same pattern, rose abruptly. In some of them, however, the fronts were carried up as high as the ridge of the shingled roof, giving them an unpleasantly square appearance. Here and there a dilapidated wagon stood with lowered pole before a store, but it was a particularly bitter afternoon, and there was nobody in the street. The place looked desolate and forlorn, with a leaden sky hanging over it and an icy wind sweeping through it.

Hawtrey, however, was used to that, and strode along briskly until he reached the open space which divided the little wooden town from the unfenced railroad track. It was strewn with fine dusty snow, and the huge bulk of the grain elevators towered high above it against the lowering sky. As it happened, a freight locomotive was just hauling a long

string of wheat cars out of a side-track amidst a discordant tolling of its bell. It stopped presently, and though Hawtreys could not see anything beyond the big cars, he fancied by the shouts which broke out that something unusual was going on. He was expecting Sally, who was going East to Brandon by a train due in an hour or two.

When the shouts grew a little louder he walked round in front of the locomotive which stood still with the steam blowing noisily from a valve, and as soon as he had done so he saw the cause of the commotion. A pair of vicious, half-broken bronchos were backing a light wagon away from the locomotive on the other side of the track, and a fur-wrapped figure sat stiffly on the driving seat. Hawtreys called out and ran forward as he saw that it was Sally.

Just then one of the horses lifted its fore hoofs off the ground, and being jerked back by the pole, plunged and kicked furiously, until its companion flung up its head and the wagon went backwards with a run. Then they stopped, and there was a further series of resounding crashes against the front of the vehicle. Hawtreys was within a pace or two of it when Sally recognized him.

"Keep off," she cried, "you can't lead them. They don't want to cross the track, but they've got to if I pull the jaws off them."

This was more forcible than elegant, and the shrill harshness of the girl's voice grated upon Hawtreys, though he was getting accustomed to Sally's phraseology. He recognized, however, that she would not have his help, even if it would have been of much avail, which was doubtful, and he reluctantly moved back towards the group of loungers who were watching her.

"I guess you've no call to worry about her," said one of them. "She's holding them on the lowest

notch, and it's a mighty powerful bit fixing. Besides, that girl could drive anything that goes on four legs."

"Sure," agreed one of the others. "She's a daisy."

Hawtrey was annoyed to notice that in place of being embarrassed by it Sally enjoyed the situation, though several of the freight train and station hands had now joined the group of loungers and were cheering her on. He had already satisfied himself that she had not a trace of fear. By and by he forgot his slight sense of vexation, for Sally, sitting tense and strung up on the driving seat with a glow in her cheeks and a snap in her eyes, was wholly admirable. There was lithe grace, virility, and resolution in every line of her fur-wrapped figure. Her appearance might have been less effective in a drawing room, but in the wagon she was in her place and in harmony with her surroundings. Lowering sky, gleaming snow, fur-clad men, and even the big, dingy locomotive, all fitted into the scene, and she made an imposing central figure as she contended with the half-tamed team. Hawtrey was conscious of a stirring of his physical nature as he watched her.

The struggle lasted for several minutes, during which the horses plunged and kicked again, until Sally stood boldly erect a moment while the wagon rocked to and fro, a tall, straight figure with a tress of loosened hair streaming out beneath her fur cap, as she swung the stinging whip. Then it seemed that the team had had enough, for as she dropped lightly back into the seat they broke into a gallop, and in another moment the wagon, jolting horribly as it bounced across the track, vanished behind the train. Gregory heard a shout of acclamation as he turned and hurried after it.

Sally, however, drove right through the settle-

ment and back outside it before she could check the horses, and she had just pulled them up in front of the wooden hotel when Hawtreys reached it. He stood beside the wagon holding up his hand to her, and Sally, who laughed, dropped bodily into his arms, which was a thing that Agatha would not have done. He set her down upon the pavement, and when a man came out to take the team they went into the hotel together.

"It was the locomotive that did it," she explained. "They were most too scared for anything, but I hate to be beaten by a team. Ours know too much to try, but I got Haslem to drive me in. I dropped him at Norton's, who'll bring him on."

"He oughtn't to have left you with them," said Hawtreys severely.

Sally laughed. "Well," she said, "I'll quit driving if I couldn't handle any team you or Haslem could put the harness on."

The hotels in the smaller prairie settlements offer very little comfort or privacy. As a rule they contain two general rooms, in one of which the three daily meals are served with a punctuality which is as unvarying as the menu. The traveller who arrives a few minutes too late for one must wait until the next is ready. The second room usually contains a rusty stove, and a few uncomfortable benches; and there are not infrequently a couple of rows of very small match-boarded cubicles on the floor overhead. The *Occident* was, however, a notable exception. For one thing, the building was unusually large, and its proprietor had condescended to study the requirements of his guests, who came for the most part from the outlying settlements. There were two rooms above the general lounge, one of which was reserved for the wives or daughters of the farmers who drove long distances to purchase

stores or clothing. In the other, dry-goods travellers were permitted to display their wares, and, though this was very unusual in that country, any privileged customer who wished to leave by a train the departure of which did not fit in with the hotel arrangements, was occasionally supplied with a meal.

It was growing dusk when Hawtrey and Sally entered the first of the two rooms, where the proprietor's wife was lighting the big lamp. She smiled at the man, who was a favourite of hers.

"Go right along, and I'll bring your supper up in a minute or two," she said. "I guess you'll want it after your drive."

Hawtrey strode on down a short corridor towards the second room, but Sally stopped behind him a moment.

"Is Hastings in town?" she asked. "I thought I saw his new wagon outside."

"His wife is," said the other woman. "She and Miss Ismay drove in to buy some things."

Sally asked no further questions. Mrs. Hastings would not start home until after supper, and as the regular hotel meal would be served ready in about half an hour, it seemed certain that she would come back to the hotel very shortly. That left Sally very little time, for she had no desire that Hawtrey should meet either Mrs. Hastings or Agatha until she had carried out the purpose she had in hand. It was at Gregory's special request she had permitted him to drive in to see her off, and she meant to make the most of the opportunity. She had long ago regretted her folly in running away from his homestead when he lay helpless, but things had changed considerably since then.

She said nothing about what she had heard to Hawtrey when she entered the second room. It was

cosily warm and brightly lighted, and the table was laid out for two with a daintiness very uncommon on the prairie. It was a change for Sally to be waited on, and have nice things laid before her which she had not made with her own fingers, and she sank into a chair with a smile of appreciation.

"It's real nice, Gregory," she said. "Supper's never the same when you've had to stand over the stove ever so long getting it ready." She sighed comically. "When I have to do that after working all day, I don't want to eat it."

The man felt compassionate. Sally, as he was aware, had to work unusually hard at the desolate homestead where she and her mother perforce undertook a good many duties that do not generally fall to a woman's share. Creighton, who was getting an old man, was of grasping nature, and only hired assistance when it was indispensable.

"Well," he said, "I'm not particularly fond of cooking either."

Sally glanced at him with a provocative smile, for he had given her a lead. "Then," she asked, "why don't you get somebody else to do it for you?"

This was almost painfully direct, but there was no doubt that Sally looked very pretty with the faint flush of colour in her cheeks and the tantalizing light in her eyes.

"As a matter of fact, that's a thing I've been thinking over rather often the last few months," he said, and laughed. "It's a pity you don't like cooking, Sally."

Sally appeared to consider this. "Oh," she said, "it depends a good deal on whom it's for."

Hawtreys became suddenly serious for a moment or two. There was no doubt that he would at one time have considered it impossible that he should

marry a girl of Sally's description, and even now he had misgivings. He had, however, almost made up his mind, and he was not pleased that the proprietor's wife came in with the meal just then, and stayed to talk awhile.

When she went out he watched Sally with close and what he fancied was unobtrusive attention while she ate, and though he was sensible of the indelicacy of this, he was once more relieved to find that she did nothing that was actually repugnant to him. There was a daintiness about the girl, and her frank appreciation of the good things set before her only amused him. She was much more amusing than Agatha had been since she had arrived in Canada, and her cheerful laughter had a pleasant ring. When at length the meal was over, she bade him draw her chair up to the stove.

"Now," she said, and pointed to another chair across the room, "you can sit yonder and smoke. I know you want to."

Hawtrey remembered that Agatha did not like tobacco smoke, and had always been inclined to exact a conventional deference which he had grown to regard as out of place upon the prairie.

"That's a very long way off," he objected.

Sally showed no sign of conceding the point as he had expected, and he took out his pipe. He wanted to think, for once more instincts deep down in him stirred in faint protest against what he almost meant to do. There were also several points that required practical consideration, and among them were his financial difficulties, though these did not trouble him so much as they had done a few months earlier. For a while neither of them said anything, and then Sally spoke.

"You're worrying about something, Gregory?" she said.

"I am. My place is a poor one, and when Wyllard comes home I shall have to go back to it again. Things would be so much easier for me just now if I had the Range."

The girl looked at him steadily with reproach in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, "your place is big enough if you'd only take hold and run it as it ought to be run. You could surely do it, Gregory, if you tried."

The man's resistance grew feebler, as it generally did when his prudence was at variance with his desires. Sally's words were wholly guileless, and they stirred him. He said nothing, however, and she spoke again.

"Isn't it worth while, though there are things you would have to give up?" she urged. "You couldn't go away and waste your dollars in Winnipeg every now and then."

Hawtreys laughed. "No," he agreed; "I suppose if I meant to make anything of the place that couldn't be done. Still, you see, it's horribly lonely sitting by oneself beside the stove in the long winter nights. I shouldn't want to go to Winnipeg if I had only somebody to keep me company."

He turned towards her suddenly with decision in his face, and Sally lowered her eyes.

"Don't you think you could get anybody if you tried?" she asked.

"The trouble," said Hawtreys gravely, "is that I have so little to offer any one. It's a poor place, and I'm afraid, Sally, that I'm a poor farmer. As you have once or twice pointed out, I don't stay with things. Still, it might be different if there was any particular reason why I should."

He rose, and crossing the room, stood close beside her chair. "Sally," he added, "would you be afraid to take hold and try what you could make of the

place and me? Perhaps you could make something, though it would be very hard work, my dear."

The blood surged into the girl's face, and she looked up at him with open triumph in her eyes. It was her hour, and Sally was not afraid of anything.

"Oh!" she said; "you really want me?"

"Yes," said Hawtrey quietly; "I think I have wanted you for ever so long, though I did not know it."

"Then," she said, "I'll do what I can, Gregory."

Hawtrey bent his head and kissed her with a deference he had not expected to feel, for there was something in the girl's simplicity and the completeness of her surrender which, though the thing seemed astonishing, laid a restraint on him. Then, as he sat down on the arm of her chair with a hand upon her shoulder, he was more astonished still, for she quietly made it clear that she expected a good deal from him. For one thing, he realized that she meant him to take and keep a foremost place among his neighbours, and, though Sally had not the gift of clear and imaginative expression, it became apparent that this was less for her own sake than his. She was, with crude forcefulness, trying to rouse a sense of responsibility in the man, to incite him to resolute action and wholesome restraint, and, as he remembered what he had hitherto thought of her, a salutary sense of confusion crept upon him.

She seemed to recognize it, for at length she glanced up at him sharply.

"What is it, Gregory? Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

Hawtrey smiled in a rather curious fashion. Hitherto she had made her appeal through his senses to one side of his nature only. There was no doubt on that point, but there were in her qualities he had never suspected. She had desired him as a husband,

but it was clear that she would not be content with mere possession. Sally had wider ideas in her mind, and, though the thing seemed almost ludicrous, she wanted to be proud of him.

"My dear," he answered, "I can't quite tell you—but you have made me ashamed. In some respects, I fear it's a very rash thing you are going to do."

She looked at him with candid perplexity, and then dismissed the subject with a smile.

"There is so much I want to say, and it mayn't be so easy—afterwards," she said. "It's a pity the cars start so soon."

"We can get over that difficulty," Hawtreys answered. "I'll come on as far as I can with you, and get back from one of the way stations by the Pacific train."

Sally made no objections, and drawing closer to him she talked on in a low tone earnestly.

CHAPTER XIX

A PAINFUL REVELATION

THE snow was blowing down the unpaved street of the railroad settlement before a bitter wind, when Mrs. Hastings came out of a store and handed Sproatly, who was waiting close by, several packages.

"You can put them into the wagon, and tell Jake we'll want the team as soon as supper's over," she said. "We're going to stay with Mrs. Ormond to-night, and I don't want to get there too late."

Sproatly took the parcels, and Mrs. Hastings turned to Agatha, who stood a pace or two behind her with Winifred.

"Now," she added, "if there's nothing else you want to buy we'll go to the hotel."

They reached it a few minutes later, and were

standing in a comfortless room where Sproatly rejoined them.

"This place is shivery," said Mrs. Hastings. "They generally have the stove lighted in the room along the corridor. Go and see, Jim."

Sproatly was wearing gum-boots, which make little noise. He proceeded along a dark corridor, and then stopped abruptly when he had reached a partly-open door, for he could see into a lighted room. Hawtrey was sitting near the stove inside it on the arm of Sally's chair.

Then, though he was not greatly astonished, Sproatly drew back into the shadow. There were two courses open to him. He could announce his presence by making the door rattle, and then go in and mention casually that Mrs. Hastings and Agatha were in the hotel. He felt that he ought to do so, but there was the difficulty that he could not warn Hawtrey without embarrassing Sally. Sproatly knitted his brows in honest perplexity as it became evident that the situation was a delicate one, and then he decided on the alternative. He would go back quietly, and keep Mrs. Hastings out of the room if it could be done.

"I think you will be as comfortable where you are," he informed her when he joined the others.

"I'm doubtful," said Mrs. Hastings. "Wasn't the stove lighted?"

"Yes," said Sproatly, "I fancy it was."

"But I sent you to make sure."

"The fact is I didn't go in," Sproatly exclaimed. "There's somebody in the room already."

"Any of the boys would go out if they knew we wanted it."

"Oh yes," said Sproatly. "Still, it's a small room, and one of them has been smoking."

Mrs. Hastings flashed a keen glance at him, and

then smiled in a manner he did not like. It suggested that while she yielded to his objections for the present, she had by no means abandoned the subject.

"Well," she said, "what shall we do until supper? This stove won't draw properly, and I don't feel inclined to sit shivering here."

Then Sproatly was seized by what proved to be a singularly unfortunate inspiration.

"It's not snowing much; let's go down to the depôt and watch the Atlantic express come in," he said. "It's one of the things everybody does."

This was correct. There are few amusements open to the inhabitants of the smaller settlements, and the arrival of the infrequent trains is a source of unflagging interest to most of them. Mrs. Hastings fell in with the suggestion, and Sproatly was congratulating himself upon his diplomacy when Agatha stopped as they reached the door of the hotel.

"Oh," she said, "I've only brought one of my mittens."

"I'll go back for the other," Sproatly offered.

"You don't know where I laid it."

"I'll lend you one of mine. It will go on right enough," the man persisted.

Agatha objected to this, and Sproatly, who fancied that Mrs. Hastings was watching him, let her go, after which he and the others moved out into the street. Agatha in the meanwhile ran back to the room they had left, and, finding the mitten, had reached the head of the stairs when she heard voices behind her in the corridor. She recognized them, and turned in sudden astonishment, standing, as it happened, in the shadow, though not far away a stream of light from the door of the room shone out into the passage. Next moment Hawtreys and Sally approached the door, and as the light fell upon them the blood surged into Agatha's face,

for she remembered the embarrassment in Sproatly's manner, and that he had done all he could to prevent her from going back for the mitten. Then Hawtrey spoke to Sally, addressing her as "My dear."

Agatha was filled with burning indignation, and Hawtrey and his companion were almost upon her before she turned and fled down the staircase. This was horribly undignified, but she could not stay and face them. When she overtook the others she had recovered her outward composure, and they went on together towards the track. As yet she was only sensible of anger at the man's treachery. It possessed her too completely for her to be conscious of anything else.

Cold as it was, there were a good many loungers in the station, and Sproatly, who spoke to one or two of them, led his party away from the shed they hung about, and walked briskly up and down beside the track until a speck of blinking light rose out of the white wilderness. It grew rapidly larger, until they could make out a trail of smoke behind it, and the roar of wheels rose in a long crescendo. Then a bell began to toll, and the blaze of a big lamp beat into their faces as the locomotive came clanking into the station.

The light from the long car window fell upon the groups of watching men, while here and there a shadowy object leaned out from a platform. There was however, no sign of any passengers for the train until at the last moment two figures appeared hurrying along beneath the cars. They drew nearer, and Agatha set her lips tight as she recognized them, for the light from a vestibule shone into Hawtrey's face as he half lifted Sally on to one of the platforms and sprang up after her. Then the bell rang again, and the train rolled slowly out of the station with its lights flashing upon the snow.

Agatha turned away abruptly and walked apart from the rest. The thing only admitted of one explanation, and she did not wish her companions to see her face. She was sensible of an intolerable disgust. She had kept faith with Gregory, and he had utterly humiliated her. The affront he had put upon her was almost unbearable.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Hastings walked up to Sproatly, who, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, had drawn back into the shadow.

"Now," she said, "I understand. You, of course, anticipated this."

"I didn't," declared Sproatly with a decision which carried conviction with it. "I saw them at the hotel, but how could I imagine that they had anything of this kind in view?"

He broke off for a moment, and waved his hand. "After all," he added, "what right have you to think it now?"

Mrs. Hastings laughed harshly. "Unfortunately, I have my eyes, but I'll admit that I must make quite certain why I want you to ascertain where he checked his baggage to."

"I'm afraid that's more than I'm willing to undertake. Do you think it's wise to fill the station agent with suspicions which mayn't be correct. Besides, once or twice in my career appearances have been against me, and I'm not altogether convinced yet."

Mrs. Hastings let the matter drop, and they went back to the hotel. As soon as supper was over she bade Sproatly get their wagon out, and drove away with Agatha. She said very little to the girl during the long, cold journey, and they had no opportunity of private conversation when they reached the homestead where they were to spend the night, which was a relief to Agatha. She hated herself for the thought in her mind, but everything seemed to warrant it,

and it would not be driven out. She had heard how Gregory addressed Sally at the hotel, and the fact that he must have bought his ticket and luggage earlier in the afternoon when there was nobody about, and then had run down with Sally at the last moment, in order to escape observation, was significant.

She went home next day, and on the following afternoon a man who was driving in to Lander's brought Mrs. Hastings a note from Sproatly. It was very brief, and ran—

"Gregory arrived same night by Pacific train. He must have got off at the next station down the line."

Mrs. Hastings showed it to her husband.

"I'm afraid we have been too hasty. What am I to do with this?" she said.

"Since you ask my advice, I'd put it into the stove."

"But it clears the man. Isn't it my duty to show it to Agatha?"

"Well," said Hastings cautiously, "I'm not sure that it is your duty to put unpleasant notions into her mind. You don't know that she has entertained them."

"I should be greatly astonished if she hadn't," the lady retorted dryly.

"Oh," said Hastings, "you'll do what you think wisest. When you come to me for advice, you have made your mind up, and only expect me to tell you that you're right."

Mrs. Hastings thought over the matter for another hour or two. For one thing, Agatha's quiet manner puzzled her, and she did not know that the girl had spent the night in an agony of anger and humiliation and had then become sensible of a relief that she was ashamed of. For there was no doubt that while she

blamed herself in some degree for what had happened, she did feel relief. Agatha was sitting alone beside the stove while the light died off the snowy prairie outside, when Mrs. Hastings came softly in and sat down beside her.

"My dear," she began, "it's difficult to speak of, but that scene at the station must have hurt you."

Agatha looked at her searchingly, but there was only sympathy in her face, and she leaned forward impulsively.

"Oh," she said, "it hurt me dreadfully, because I feel it was my fault. I was the cause of it."

"How could that be?"

"If I had only been kinder to him he would, perhaps, never have thought of her. I drove him"—and Agatha turned her face away, while her voice grew hard—"into that woman's arms. No doubt she was ready to make the most of the opportunity."

Mrs. Hastings decided that the girl's scorn and disgust which had prompted the last outbreak were perfectly natural, but they were not quite justified.

"In the first place," she said, "I think you had better read this note."

Agatha took it from her, and there was light enough left to show that the blood had crept into her face when she laid it down again.

"It is a great relief to know that I was wrong—in one respect; but you must not think I hated this girl because Gregory preferred her to me," she said at length. "When the first shock had passed, there was a wicked satisfaction in feeling that he had released me—at any cost. I suppose I shall always be ashamed of that."

She broke off a moment, and her voice was very quiet when she went on again.

"Still," she added, "Sproatly's note does not

alter the case so very much. It can't free me of my responsibility. If I hadn't driven him, Gregory would not have gone to her."

"You consider that in itself a very unfortunate thing?"

Agatha looked at her with suddenly lifted head. "Of course," she said. "Can you doubt it?"

Her companion laughed, though there was a gleam in her eyes, for this was an opportunity she had been waiting for.

"There," she said, "you spoke like an Englishwoman—of station—just out from the Old Country—but I'm going to try to disabuse you of one impression. Sally, to put it crudely, is quite good enough for Gregory. In fact, if she had been my daughter I'd have kept her away from him. To begin with, once you strip Gregory of his surface graces, and his cultured English intonation, how does he compare with the men you meet out here? What does his superiority consist in? Is he truer or kinder than you have found most of them to be? Has he a finer courage, or a more resolute endurance—a greater capacity for labour, or a clearer knowledge of the calling by which he makes his living?"

Agatha did not answer. She could not protest that Gregory possessed any of these qualities, and her companion continued.

"Has he even a more handsome person? I could point to a dozen men between here and the railroad, whose clean, self-denying life has set a stamp on them that Gregory will never wear. To descend to one of the lowest points of all, has he more money? We know he wasted what he had—probably in indulgence—and there is a mortgage on his farm. Has he any sense of honour? He let Sally believe he was in love with her before you even came out here, and of late, while he still claimed you, he has gone

back to her. Can't you get away from your point of view, and realize what kind of man he is?"

Agatha turned her head. "Ah!" she said, "I summed him up—several months ago. They were painful months to me. But are you sure he was in love with Sally before I came out?"

"Well," said Mrs. Hastings, "his conduct suggested it." Then she laid a caressing hand on the girl's shoulder. "You tried to keep faith with him. Tried desperately, I think. Did you succeed?"

Agatha contrived to meet her companion's eyes. "At least, I would have married him."

"Then," said Mrs. Hastings, "I can forgive Gregory even his treachery, and you have no cause to pity him. Sally's simple—primitive, you would call her—but she's clever and capable in all practical things. She will bear with Gregory when you would turn from him in disgust, and when it's necessary she will not shrink from putting pressure on him in a way you could not have done. It may sound incomprehensible, but that girl will lead or drive Gregory very much farther than he could have gone with you. She doesn't regard him as perfection, but she loves him."

She broke off, and there was for several minutes a tense silence. It had grown almost dark, and the square of the window glimmered faintly with the dim light flung up by the snow.

Then Agatha turned slowly in her chair. "Thank you," she said in a low voice. "You have taken a heavy weight off my mind."

She paused a moment and then added: "You have been a good friend all along. It was supreme good fortune that placed me in your hands."

Mrs. Hastings patted her shoulder, and then went out quietly, and Agatha lay still in her chair beside the stove. It snapped and crackled cheerfully, but

save for that there was a restful quietness, and the room was cosily warm, through she could hear the icy wind wail about the building. It swept her thoughts away to the frozen North, and she understood how much it had cost her to keep faith with Gregory as she pictured a snow-sheeted schooner hemmed in among the floes, and two or three worn-out men hauling a sled painfully over the ridged and furrowed ice. The man who had gone up into that great desolation had been endowed with an almost fantastic sense of honour, and now he might never even know that she loved him. She no longer tried to ignore the fact that she did so.

CHAPTER XX

THROUGH THE SNOW

NEXT morning, the mail-carrier, who drove up to the homestead half-frozen and white all over out of a haze of falling snow, brought Agatha a note from Gregory. It was brief, and she read it with a smile of half-amused contempt, though she admitted that, considering everything, he had handled the somewhat embarrassing situation gracefully. This, however, was only what she had expected of him, and she recognized that it was equally characteristic of the man that he had written releasing her from her engagement instead of coming himself. Gregory, as she realized now, had always taken the easiest way, and it was evident that he had not even the courage to face her. She quietly dropped his note—it did not seem worth while to fling it—into the stove.

She could forgive him for choosing Sally, but she could not forgive him for persisting in his claim to her while he was philandering with her rival. Had he only been honest, she would not have let Wyllard

go away without some assurance of her regard to cheer him on his perilous journey, and it was clear to her that he might never come back again. Her face grew hard when she thought of it, and she had thought of it of late very frequently. For that she felt she almost hated Gregory.

A month passed drearily, with Arctic frost outside on the prairie, and little to do inside the homestead except to cook and gorge the stove, and endeavour to keep warmth in one. Water froze solid inside the building, stinging draughts crept in through the double windows, and there were evenings when Mrs. Hastings and Agatha, shivering close beside the stove, waited anxiously for the first sign of the sled which Hastings and his hired man were bringing back loaded with birch logs from a neighbouring bluff. It was only a couple of miles away, but men sent out to cut fuel in the awful cold snaps in that country have now and then sunk down in the snow with the life frozen out of them. There were other days when the wooden building rocked beneath the buffeting of the icy hurricane, and it was perilous to cross the narrow open space between it and the stables through the whirling snow.

The weather moderated by and by, and one afternoon Mrs. Hastings drove off to Lander's with the one hired man they kept through the winter. Her husband, who insisted upon her taking him, had set out earlier for the bluff, and as the Scandinavian maid had recently been married, Agatha was left in the house with the little girls.

It was bitterly cold, even inside the dwelling, but Agatha was busy baking, and did not notice that the frost had once more become almost Arctic, until she stood beside a window as evening was closing in. A low, dingy sky hung over the narrowing sweep of prairie which stretched back, gleaming lividly into

the creeping dusk, but a few minutes later a storm of snow whirled across it and cut the dreary scene in half. Then the light died out suddenly, and she and the girls drew their chairs close up to the stove. The house was very quiet, but she could hear the mournful wailing of the wind about it, and now and then the soft swish of driven snow upon the walls and roofing shingles.

The table was laid for supper, and a kettle was singing cheerfully upon the stove, but there was no sign of the others, and by and by Agatha grew anxious. Mrs. Hastings might stay the night at Lander's if there was any unfavourable change in the weather, but she wondered what could be detaining Hastings. It was not very far to the bluff, and as he could not have continued chopping in the darkness, he should have reached the homestead already.

He did not come, however, and her uneasiness increased as the time slipped by, while the sigh of the wind grew louder and the stove crackled more noisily. At last one of the little girls rose with a cry, and she fancied she heard a dull beat of hoofs. It grew plainer until she was sure of it, but presently the sound ceased abruptly, and she could not hear the rattle of flung down logs which she had expected. This was strange, since Hastings generally unloaded the sled, before he led the team to the stable. Except for the doleful wind nothing broke the silence now, and when this became oppressive, Agatha moved towards the door.

The wind tore it from her grasp when she opened it, and flung it against the wall with a jarring crash, while a fine powder that stung the skin unbearably drove into her face. For a few moments she could see nothing, and then, as her eyes became accustomed to the change of light, she dimly made out the blurred white figures of the horses standing still, with the load

of birch logs rising a shapeless mass behind them. There seemed to be nobody with them, and though she twice called sharply no answer came out of the sliding snow. Then she knew that the team had come home alone.

It was difficult to close the door, and before she accomplished it her hands had stiffened and the hall was strewn with snow. It cost her three or four minutes to slip on a blanket skirt, and soft hide moccasins, with gum boots over them, and then, muffled in her furs, she reassured the little girls, and opened the door again. When she had contrived to close it, the cold struck through her to the bone as she floundered towards the team. There was nobody she could look to for assistance, but that could not be helped, and it was obvious that some misfortune had befallen Hastings.

The first thing necessary was to unload the sled, and, though the birches seldom grow to any size in a prairie bluff, some of the logs were heavy. She was gasping with the effort when she had flung a few of them down, after which she discovered that the rest were held up by one or two stout poles let into sockets. Try as she would, she could not get them out, and then she remembered that Hastings kept a whipsaw in a shed close by. With this she attacked the poles in breathless haste, working clumsily with mittened hands, until there was a crash and rattle as she sprang clear. Then she started the team, and the rest of the logs rolled off into the snow.

That was one difficulty overcome, but the next was more serious. She must find the bluff as soon as possible, and in the snow-filled darkness she could not tell where it lay. Even if she could have seen anything of the kind, there was no landmark on the desolate level waste between the homestead and it. She remembered, however, that she had one guide.

Hastings and his hired man had of late hauled a good many loads of birch logs in, and as this had made a worn-out trail it seemed to her just possible that she might trace it back to the bluff. No great weight of snow had fallen as yet.

Before she set out she had a struggle with the team, for the beasts had naturally no intention of making another journey if they could help it, but at length she swung them into the narrow riband of trail, and plodded away into the darkness at their heads. It was then she first clearly realized what she had undertaken. Very little of her face was left bare between her fur-cap and collar, but every inch of uncovered skin tingled as though it had been lashed with thorns or stabbed with innumerable needles. The air was thick with a fine powder that filled her eyes and nostrils, the wind buffeted her, and there was an awful cold—the cold that taxes the utmost strength of mind and body of those who are forced to face it on the shelterless prairie.

Still she struggled on, feeling with half-frozen feet for the depression of the trail, and grappling with a horrible dismay when she failed to find it for moments together. Indeed, she was never sure to what extent she guided the team, and how far they headed for the bluff from mere force of habit, but as the time went by, and there was nothing before her but the whirling snow, she grew feverishly apprehensive. The trail was becoming fainter and fainter, and now and then she could find no trace of it for several minutes.

The horses, however, floundered on, blurred shapes as white as the maze they crept through, and at length she felt that they were dipping into a hollow. Then a faint sense of comfort crept into her heart as she remembered that a shallow ravine which seamed the prairie ran through the bluff. She called out, and started at the faintness of her voice. It seemed such

a pitifully feeble thing. There was no answer, nothing but the soft fall of the horses' hoofs and the wail of the wind, but the latter was reassuring, for the volume of sound suggested that it was driving through a bluff close by.

A few minutes later she cried out again, and this time she felt a throbbing of her heart, for a faint sound came out of the drifting snow. She pulled the horses up, and as she stood still listening, a shadowy object appeared almost in front of them. It shambled forward in a curious manner, stopped, and moved again, and in another moment or two Hastings lurched by her with a stagger and sank down into a huddled white heap on the sled. She turned back towards him, and he looked up at her.

"Turn the team," he said.

Agatha did so, and sat down beside him as the horses moved on again.

"A small birch I was chopping fell on me," he exclaimed. "I don't know if it smashed my ankle, or if I twisted it wriggling clear—the thing pinned me down. It's badly nipped, any way."

He spoke disconnectedly and hoarsely, as if in pain, and Agatha, who noticed that one of his gum boots was almost ripped to pieces, realized part of what he must have felt. She knew that nobody held fast helpless could have withstood that cold for long.

"Oh," she said, "it must have been dreadful!"

"I found a branch," said Hastings. "It helped me, but I fell over every now and then. Headed for the homestead. Don't think I could have made it if you hadn't come for me." He broke off abruptly, and turned to her. "You mustn't sit down. Walk—keep warm—but don't try to lead the team."

Agatha struggled forward as far as the near horse's shoulder. The beasts slightly sheltered her, and it was a little easier walking with a hand upon a

trace. It was an assistance to cling to something, for the wind that flung the snow into her face drove her garments against her limbs, so that now and then she could scarcely move. Indeed, when her strength began to flag, every yard of that journey was made with infinite pain and difficulty. At times she could scarcely see the horses, and again she stumbled along beside them for minutes, blinded, breathless, and half-dazed. She did not know how Hastings was faring, but she had an unpleasant notion that if once she let the trace go the sled would slip away from her and she would sink down never to rise.

At length, however, a dim mass crept out of the whiteness ahead, and a moment later a man laid hold of her. He told her that Mrs. Hastings was with him and that the homestead was close at hand. Agatha learned afterwards that she had reached it a little earlier, and immediately set out in search of her and Hastings. In the meanwhile she floundered on beside the horses with another team dimly visible in front of her, until a faint ray of light streamed out into the snow. Then the teams stopped, and she had only a hazy recollection of staggering into a lighted room in the homestead and sinking into a chair. What they did with Hastings she did not know, but by and by his wife, who accompanied her to her room, kissed her before she went out.

Nobody could have faced the snow next morning, and it was some days later when Watson, who had attended Hawtrey after his accident, was brought over. He did what he could, but it was several weeks before Hastings was able to use his injured foot again. Before he recovered news was sent him of some difficulty in the affairs of a small business at a settlement farther along the line, in which he and his wife held an interest, and Mrs. Hastings went East to make inquiries respecting it. She took Agatha with her, which was how it

happened that one evening after she had finished her investigations, they left the little way station by the Pacific train.

The car they entered was empty except for two people who sat close together near the middle of it. A big lamp overhead shed down a brilliant light, and Agatha started when one of the two looked round as she approached them. In another moment she stood face to face with Hawtreys, who had risen, while Sally gazed up at her with an indefinable expression in her eyes. Agatha, however, was perfectly composed now, and felt no sympathy with Hawtreys, who was visibly confused. She was not astonished that he found the situation an awkward one.

"You have been to Winnipeg?" she asked.

"No," said Hawtreys, "only to Brandon. Sally has some friends there, and she spends a day or two with them once or twice each winter. Brandon's quite a lively place after the prairie. I went in last night to bring her back." He turned to his companion. "I think you have met Miss Ismay?"

Agatha was conscious that Sally's eyes were fixed upon her, and that Mrs. Hastings was watching them with quiet amusement, but she was surprised when the girl pointedly moved some wraps from the seat opposite her.

"Yes," she said, "I have. If Miss Ismay doesn't mind, I should like to talk to her."

Hawtreys's relief was evident, and Agatha glanced at him with a smile that was half-contemptuous. He had carefully kept out of her way since he had written her the note, and now it was only natural that if there was anything to be said he should leave it to Sally.

"I think I'll go along for a smoke," he said, and retired precipitately.

Mrs. Hastings looked after him, and laughed in a manner at which Sally winced.

"He doesn't seem anxious to talk to me," she remarked. "You can come along to the next car by and by, Agatha."

Then she moved away, and Agatha, who sat down opposite Sally, looked at her inquiringly.

"Well?" she said.

"I've something to say, but it's hard. To begin with, are you very angry with me?"

"No," said Agatha. "I think I really am a little angry with Gregory, but not altogether because he chose you."

Sally considered this before she looked up again.

"Well," she said, "not long ago, I wanted to hate you, and I guess I most succeeded. It made things easier. But I want to say that I don't hate you now." She hesitated. "I'd like you to forgive me."

Agatha smiled. "In most respects I can do that willingly."

Sally was disconcerted by her quiet ease of manner and perfect candour. It was not what she had looked for.

"Then you were never very fond of him?" she suggested.

"No," said Agatha reflectively, "since you have compelled me to say it, I don't think now that I ever was really fond of him, though I don't know how I can make that quite clear to you. It was only when I came out here I—realized—Gregory. It was not the actual man I fell in love with in England."

Sally turned her face away, for Agatha had made her meaning perfectly plain. To the latter's astonishment, Sally showed no sign of resentment when she looked round again.

"Then," she said, "it is better that you didn't marry him." She paused, searching for words to express herself with. "I knew all along all there was to know about Gregory—except that he was

going to marry you, and it was some time before I heard that—and I was ready to take him. I was fond of him.”

Agatha's heart went out to her. “Yes,” she said simply, “it is a very good thing that I let him go.” Then she smiled. “That, however, doesn't quite describe it, Sally.”

Her companion flushed. “I couldn't have said that, but you don't understand yet. I said I knew all there was to know about him—and you never did. You saw him, as he wasn't, in England, and when you came out here you only saw the things you didn't like in him. Still, they weren't the only ones.”

Agatha started at this, for she realized that part of it was true, and the rest might be equally correct. After all, Gregory might possess a few good qualities she had never discovered.

“Perhaps you are right, but I don't think it matters now.”

“They're all of them mixed,” persisted Sally. “One can't expect too much, but you can bear with a good deal when you're fond of any one.”

Agatha sat silent awhile, for she was troubled by a sense of wholesome confusion. Sally had the clearer vision; love had given her discernment as well as charity, and, not expecting perfection, it was the man's strong points she fixed her eyes upon.

“Yes,” she said at length, “I am glad you look at it that way, Sally.”

The girl laughed. “Oh!” she said, “I've only seen one man on the prairie who was quite white all through, and I had a kind of notion that he was fond of you.”

Agatha sat very still, but it cost her an effort.

“You mean?” she said at length.

“Harry Wyllard.”

Agatha made no answer, and Sally changed the

subject. "Well," she said presently, "I want you to be friends with me."

"I think you can count on that," said Agatha with a smile, and in another minute or two she rose to rejoin Mrs. Hastings.

CHAPTER XXI

NEWS OF DISASTER

HARRY WYLLARD'S forlorn hope ended in calamity, or so it appeared. After reaching the inhospitable region of his quest, he had at once started along with two men in one of the schooner's boats. The weather was vile, and day after day passed without sign of his return. The rest of the crew could stand the suspense no longer, and departed in search of the searchers. They had, however, to accept defeat, rejoining their vessel only after intense sufferings and almost superhuman effort. The schooner made for the nearest shore, and Dampier, still reluctant to abandon hope, went off with one of the men, to make a landing on the ice, only to find it covered with a trackless sheet of slushy snow. Though he floundered shorewards a mile or two, there was nothing except a shattered boat to hint at what had befallen Wyllard and his companions, but the skipper, who retraced his steps with a heavy heart, had little doubt in his mind. After that he waited two days, until a strong breeze blew him off the ice, which was rapidly breaking up, and then he stood out for open water, where he hove the *Selache* to for a week or so. Then he proceeded northwards to the inlet that had been fixed upon as a rendezvous.

He was convinced that this was hopeless, but as the opening was almost clear of ice, he sailed the

schooner in, and spent a week or two scouring the surrounding country. He found it a desolation, still partly covered with sodden snow, out of which ridges of volcanic rock rose here and there. On two of these spots, a couple of days' march from the schooner, he made a depôt of provisions, and raised a beacon of piled-up stones beside them. When it was clear, he could see the top of a great range high up against the western sky, but such times were rare. For the most part, the wilderness was swept by rain or wrapped in clammy fog.

There was, however, no sign of Wyllard, and at length Dampier, coming back jaded and dejected from another fruitless search, after the time agreed upon had expired, shut himself up alone for a couple of hours in the cabin. He was satisfied now that Wyllard and his companions had been drowned while attempting to make a landing on the ice, since they would have joined him at the inlet as arranged had this not been the case. The distance was by no means great, and there were no Russian settlements on that part of the coast. He sat very still, with clenched hand upon the table, and a set face, balancing conjecture against conjecture, and then regretfully decided that there was only one course open to him. It was dark when he went up on deck again, but the men were sitting smoking about the windlass forward.

"You can heave some of that cable in, boys," he said. "We'll clear out for Vancouver at sun-up."

They said nothing, but they shipped the levers, and Dampier went back to the cabin, for the clank of the windlass and the ringing of the cable grated upon him.

Early next morning the *Selache* stood out to sea, and after they had left the fog and rain which hung about the coast behind, she carried fine weather

with her across the Pacific. On reaching Vancouver, Dampier had some trouble with the authorities, to whom it was necessary to report the drowning of three of his crew, but he was more fortunate than he expected, and after placing the schooner in the hands of a broker for sale, he left the city one evening on the Atlantic train. Three days later, he was driving across the prairie towards the Hastings homestead, the inmates of which were sitting together in the big general room after supper, when the wagon he had hired swung into sight over the crest of a rise.

It was a still, hot evening, and as the windows were open wide, a faint beat of hoofs came up across the tall wheat and dusty prairie before the wagon topped the slight elevation. Hastings, who lay in a cane chair near the window, with his pipe in his hand, looked up as he heard the sound.

"Somebody driving in," he said, "I shouldn't be astonished if it's Gregory. He spoke of coming over the last time I saw him."

"If he wants to talk about a deal in wheat, he can stay away," said Mrs. Hastings. "If all one hears is true, he has lost quite a few of Harry's dollars on the market lately."

Hastings looked somewhat troubled. "I'd sooner think it was his own dollars he'd thrown away."

"That's out of the question. He hasn't any."

"Well," said Hastings, with an air of reflection, "I'll get Sproatly to make inquiries. He'll probably be along with Winifred this evening, and if he finds that Gregory is getting rather deep, I'll have a word or two with him. Anyway, I can't have him wasting Harry's money, and I have some right to protest, as one of the executors."

Agatha started at the last word. It had an ominous ring, and she fancied that Hastings had noticed the effect it had on her, for he seemed to glance at her

curiously. Turning from him, she rose and walked towards the window.

The wheat stretched across the foreground, tall and darkly green, and beyond it the white grass ran back to the rise, which cut sharp against a red and smoky glow. The sun had dipped some little time ago, and already there was a wonderful exhilarating coolness in the air. Somehow the sight reminded her of another evening, when she had looked out across the prairie from a seat at Wyllard's table almost a year ago.

In the meanwhile, a wagon was drawing nearer, and the beat of hoofs, which grew steadily louder, made the memories clearer. She had heard Dampier driving in the night Wyllard had received his summons, and now she wondered who the approaching stranger was and what his business could be. She did not know why, but she scarcely thought it was Gregory.

Presently Hastings looked round again. "It's the team Bramfield hires out at the settlement," he said. "None of our friends would get him to drive them in. There are two men in the wagon. Bramfield will be one; I can't make out the other."

Mrs. Hastings, curious about the unexpected guest, walked forward in turn, and they stood watching the wagon until Agatha made an abrupt movement.

"It's Captain Dampier," she said.

Then she stood like a statue, with lips slightly parted, and a strained look in her eyes, while Hastings gazed at the wagon.

"Yes," he said, and his voice was harsh, "it's Dampier. The other man's surely Bramfield. Harry's not with him."

Once more he glanced at Agatha, who turned away and sat down in the nearest chair. She said

nothing, and there was an oppressive silence, through which the beat of hoofs and rattle of wheels rang more distinctly.

In a few minutes Dampier came in, while his companion drove off to the stables. He shook hands with Agatha and Mrs. Hastings diffidently.

"You remember me?" he asked.

"Of course," said Mrs. Hastings, with a trace of sharpness. "Where's Harry?"

The skipper spread out a hard hand and sat down heavily.

"That," he said, "is what I have to tell you. He asked me to."

"He asked you to?" Agatha broke in, and though her voice was strained, there was relief in it.

The skipper's gesture seemed to beseech her patience.

"Yes," he said, "if—anything went wrong, he told me I was to bring Mrs. Hastings word."

Agatha turned her head aside, but Mrs. Hastings saw the lace which hung beneath her neck sharply rise and fall.

"Then," she said, "something has gone wrong?"

"About as wrong as it could," and Dampier quietly met her gaze. "Wyllard and two other men are drowned."

He broke off abruptly, and Mrs. Hastings fancied she saw Agatha shiver, but by and by the girl turned slowly round with a drawn, white face. It was, however, Hastings who spoke, almost sternly.

"Go on," he bade Dampier.

"I'm to tell you all?"

This time it was Agatha who answered.

"Yes," she said, with a quietness that struck the rest as being strained and unnatural, "you must tell us all."

Dampier, who appeared to shrink from his task,

began awkwardly, but he gained coherence and force of expression as he proceeded—at least, he made them understand something of the grim resolution which had animated Wyllard. He pictured, in terse seaman's words, the little schooner plunging to windward over long phalanxes of icy seas, or crawling, white with snow, through the blinding fog. His companions saw the big combers tumbling, ready to break short upon the dipping bows, out of the dark, and half-frozen men struggling for dear life with folds of madly-thrashing sail. The pictures were, however, necessarily somewhat blurred and hazy, for, after all, only an epic poet could fittingly describe the things that must be done and borne at sea, and epic poets—it is, perhaps, a pity—are not bred in the forecastle. When he reached the last scene, he gained almost dramatic power, and Agatha's face grew strangely pallid and intent. She saw the dim figures pulling in the flying spray beneath the wall of ice.

"We ran her in," he added, "with the snow blinding us. It was working up for a heavy blow, and as we'd have to beat her out, we couldn't take sail off her. We stood on until we heard the sea along the edge of the ice, and then there was nothing to do but jam her on the wind and thrash her clear. There was only a plank or two of the boat, an oar, and Charlie's cap, when we came back again!"

"After all, though the boat was smashed, they might have got out," Hastings suggested.

"Well," said Dampier simply, "it didn't seem likely. The ice was sharp and ragged, and there was a long wash of sea. A man's not tough enough to stand much of that kind of hammering."

Agatha's face became whiter, but Dampier, who had paused, went on again.

"Anyway," he said, "they didn't turn up at the

inlet as we'd fixed, and that decided the thing. If Wyllard had been alive, he would have come."

"Isn't it just possible that he might have fallen into the hands of the Russians?" Hastings suggested.

"I naturally thought of that, but, so far as the chart shows, there isn't a settlement within leagues of the spot. Besides, supposing the Russians had got him, how could I have helped him? They'd have sent him off, in the first place, to one of the bigger settlements in the South; and if the authorities couldn't have connected him with any illegal sealing, they'd have sent him across to Japan by and by. In that case, he'd have got home without any trouble."

He paused, and it was significant that he turned to Agatha with a deprecatory gesture.

"No," he added, "there was nothing I could do."

Agatha acquitted him, but she asked a question.

"Captain Dampier," she said, "had you any expectation of finding those three men when you attempted it the second time?"

"No," said the bronzed sailorman, with an impressive quietness, "I hadn't any, and I don't think Wyllard had, either. Still, he meant to make certain." He spread a hand out forcibly. "He felt he had to."

He gazed at Agatha, and saw comprehension in her eyes.

"Yes," she said; "and when you have said that, as you have done, you could have said nothing more of any man."

Then once more there was, for a short while, a heavy silence in the room. It cost the girl a painful effort to sit still, apparently unmoved, but there was strength in her, and she would not betray her distress. She felt that the latter must be quietly

grappled with. It was almost overwhelming, horribly acute, but there was mingled with it a consolatory thrill of pride, for it was clear that the man who had loved her had done a splendid thing. He had given all that he had—and she knew she would never forget that phrase of his—willingly, and it seemed to her that the gifts he had been entrusted with were rare and precious ones—steadfast, unflinching courage, compassion, and the fine sense of honour which had sent him out on that forlorn hope. He had gone down, unyielding and undismayed—she was sure of that—amidst the blinding snow, but this was his vindication which had crowned him with immortal laurels.

Then Mrs. Hastings rose, and set food before Dampier, while by and by Sproatly and Winifred arrived, and were told the story. After that, Dampier, who seemed to be a man of tact, stood up. He had already, when asked by Mrs. Hastings, promised to stay with them a day or two.

“Well,” he said, “you’ll naturally want to talk over things. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll take a stroll across the prairie.”

He went out, and Hastings, who lighted his pipe, lay back in his chair and looked at the rest.

“Harry’s friends are numerous, but we’re, perhaps, the nearest, and, as Dampier said, we have to consider things,” he said. “To begin with, there’s a possibility that he has escaped, after all.”

He saw the abrupt movement that Agatha made, and went on more quickly—

“Gregory, of course, has control at the Range until we have proof of Harry’s death, though the latter made a proviso that if there was no word of the party within eighteen months after he had sailed, or within six months of the time Dampier had landed him, we could presume it, after which the will he handed

me would take effect. This leaves Gregory in charge for some months yet, but it's our duty to see he doesn't fling away Harry's property. I've reasons for believing that he has been doing it of late."

He looked at Sproatly.

"I'm rather awkwardly placed," the latter said at length. "You see, there's no doubt that I'm indebted to Gregory."

Winifred turned to him with impatience in her eyes. "Then," she said severely, "you shouldn't have been, and it ought to be clear that nobody wishes you to do anything that would hurt him." She looked at Hastings. "In case the will takes effect, whom does the property go to?"

Hastings appeared embarrassed. "That," he objected, "is a thing I'm not warranted in telling you in the meanwhile."

A suggestive smile crept into Winifred's eyes, but it vanished, and her manner became authoritative when she turned back to Sproatly.

"Jim," she said, "you will tell Mr. Hastings all you know."

"Well," he acquiesced, "I think it's necessary. Gregory, as I've told you already, put up a big mortgage on his place, and in view of the price of wheat and the state of his crop, it's evident that he must have had some difficulty in meeting the interest, unless—and one or two things suggest this—he paid it with Harry's money. Of course, as Harry gave him a share, there was no reason why he shouldn't do this, so long as he did not overdraw that share. There's no doubt, however, that he has lost a good deal of money on the wheat market."

"Has he lost any of Harry's?" Mrs. Hastings asked.

Sproatly hesitated. "I'm afraid he has."

Then Winifred broke in. "Yes," she said, "he

has lost a great deal. Hamilton knows almost everything that's going on, and I got it out of him. He's a friend of Wyllard's, and seems very vexed with Gregory."

The others said nothing for a time, and then Mrs. Hastings spoke.

"In a general way," she said, "most of us don't keep much in the bank, and that expedition must have cost Harry a good deal. How would Gregory get hold of the money before harvest?"

"Edmonds, who holds his mortgage, would let him have it," Sproatly answered.

"But wouldn't he be afraid of Gregory not being able to pay if the market went against him?"

Sproatly looked very thoughtful. "The arrangement Wyllard made with Gregory would, no doubt, give Edmonds a claim upon the Range if Gregory borrowed any money in his name. I almost think that's what he's scheming for. The man's cunning enough for anything. I don't like him."

Then Hastings stood up with an air of resolution.

"Yes," he said, "I'm most afraid you're right. Anyway, I'll drive over in a day or two and have a talk with Gregory."

After that they separated, for Hastings strolled away to join Dampier, and Sproatly and Winifred walked out on to the prairie. When they had left the house, Sproatly turned to his companion.

"Why did you insist upon my telling them what I did?" he asked.

"Oh," said Winifred, "I had several reasons. For one thing, when I first came out, feeling very forlorn and friendless, it was Wyllard who sent me to the elevator, where they have treated me very decently."

"They?" said Sproatly, with resentment in his face. "If you mean Hamilton, he treats you with

an excess of decency that there's no occasion for."

Winifred laughed. "In any case, he doesn't drive me out here every two or three weeks, though"—and she glanced at her companion provocatively—"he once or twice suggested that he would like to."

"I suppose you pointed out his presumption?"

"No," said Winifred with an air of reflection, "I didn't go so far as that. The man is my employer; I had to handle him tactfully."

"He won't be your employer a week after the implement people open their new dépôt," said Sproatly resolutely. "Anyway, we're getting away from the subject. Have you any more reasons for concerning yourself about what Gregory does with Wyllard's property?"

"I've one. I suppose you don't know whom he has left at least a part of it to?"

Sproatly started as an idea crept into his mind.

"I wonder if you're right?" he said.

"I feel reasonably sure of it," and Winifred smiled. "In fact, that's partly why I don't want Gregory to throw any more of Wyllard's money away. In the meanwhile, you have done all I expect from you."

"Then Hastings is to go on with the thing?"

"Hastings," Winifred assured him, "will fail, just as you would. This is a matter which requires to be handled delicately—and effectively."

"Then who is going to undertake it?"

Winifred laughed. "Oh," she said, "a woman, naturally. I'm going back by and by to have a word or two with Mrs. Hastings."

CHAPTER XXII

THE RESCUE

WINIFRED'S views were shortly proved correct, for Hastings, who drove over to the Range a day or

two after her visit, came back disturbed in temper from what he described as a very unsatisfactory interview with Hawtreys.

"I couldn't make the man hear reason," he informed his wife. "In fact, he practically told me that the thing was no concern of mine. I assured him that it concerned me directly as one of the executors of Harry's will, and I'm afraid I afterwards indulged in a few personalities. I expect that blamed mortgage broker has got a very strong hold on him."

Mrs. Hastings looked reflective. "You have never told me anything about the will."

"If I haven't, it wasn't for want of prompting," said Hastings dryly. "Still, the will was sealed, and handed me by Harry on the express understanding that it was not to be opened until we had proof that he was dead, or the six months mentioned had expired. If he turned up, it would, of course, be handed back to him. He made me promise solemnly that I would not offer the least hint as to its provisions to anybody."

Mrs. Hastings made a gesture of resignation. "In that case, I suppose I must be content, but he might have made an exception of—me. Anyway, I think I see how we can put what appears to be needful pressure upon Gregory." Then she turned to her husband abruptly. "But is it worth while for me to trouble about the thing?"

Hastings was taken off his guard. "Yes," he said decidedly. "If you can put any pressure on Gregory, I guess it would be very desirable to do it as soon as possible."

"Then you think that Harry may turn up, after all?"

"I do," Hastings answered; "I don't know why. In any case, it's highly desirable, for several reasons, that Gregory shouldn't ruin the property."

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "Well," she said, "I'll think over it. I'll probably get Agatha to see what she can do, in the first place."

She saw a trace of uncertainty in her husband's face, which was, however, what she had expected.

"As you like," he said. "Something must be done, but, on the whole, I'd rather you didn't trouble Agatha about the matter; it would be wiser."

Mrs. Hastings asked no more questions. She fancied she understood the situation, and she had Agatha's interests at heart, for she had grown very fond of the girl. There was one difficulty in the way of what she meant to do, but she determined to disregard it, though she admitted that it might cause Agatha some embarrassment afterwards. During the afternoon she found the latter alone, and sat down beside her.

"My dear," she said, "I wonder if I may ask whether you are quite convinced that Harry is dead?"

She felt that the question was necessary, though it seemed a cruel one, and she saw signs of tension in the girl's expression.

"No," said the latter very quietly, "I can't bring myself to believe it."

"Then, since you heard what Sproatly said, you would be willing to do anything possible to prevent Gregory from throwing Harry's dollars away?"

"Yes," said Agatha, "I have been thinking about it." A sparkle of disdainful anger crept into her eyes. "Gregory seems to have been acting shamefully."

"Then, as he won't listen to Allen, we must get Sally to impress that fact on him."

"Sally?" said Agatha in astonishment.

Mrs. Hastings smiled. "I don't think you understand Sally as well as I do. Of course, like the rest

of us, she falls a long way short of perfection, and—though it's a delicate subject—her conduct in leading Gregory on, while he was still engaged to you, was improper. But you owe her something for that."

"It isn't very hard to forgive her for it," Agatha agreed.

"Well, I want you to realize Sally. Right or wrong, she's fond of the man. I've told you this already, but I must try to make it clear how the fact bears upon the business in hand. Sally certainly fought for him, and there's no doubt that one could find fault with several things she did; but the point is that she's evidently determined on making the most of him now she's got him. In some respects, at least, she's absolutely straight—one hundred cents to the dollar is what Allen says of her—and although you might perhaps not have expected this, I believe it would hurt her horribly to feel that Gregory was squandering money that didn't belong to him."

"Then you mean to make her understand what he is doing?"

"No," said Mrs. Hastings; "I want you to do it. I've reasons for believing that your influence would go farther with her than mine. For one thing, I fancy she is feeling slightly ashamed of herself."

Agatha looked thoughtful. She had not credited Sally with possessing any fine sense of honour, but she was willing to accept her companion's assurance.

"The situation," she pointed out, "is rather a delicate one. You wish to expose Gregory's conduct to the girl he is going to marry, though, as you admit, the explanation will probably be painful to her. Can't you understand that the course suggested is a particularly repugnant one—to me?"

"I've no doubt of it," said Mrs. Hastings. "Still, I think it must be adopted, for several reasons. In

the first place, I fancy that if we can pull Gregory up now, we will save him from involving himself irretrievably. After all, perhaps, you owe him the effort. Then I think we all owe something to Harry, and we can, at least, endeavour to carry his wishes out. He laid down what was to be done with his possessions in a will, and he never could have anticipated Gregory dissipating them as he is doing."

The last reason, as she had foreseen, proved conclusive, and Agatha made a sign of concurrence.

"If you will drive me over, I will do what I can," she said.

Now she had succeeded, Mrs. Hastings lost no time, and they set out for the Creightons' homestead next day, while soon after they reached it, she tactfully contrived that Sally should be left alone with Agatha. They were standing outside the house together, when the latter turned to her companion.

"Sally," she said, "there is something that I must tell you."

Sally glanced at her face, and then walked quietly forward until the log barn hid them from the house. Then she sat down upon a pile of straw in its shadow, and bade Agatha take a place beside her.

"Now," she said sharply, "you can go on. It's about Gregory?"

Agatha, who found it very difficult to begin, though she had been well primed by Hastings on the previous evening, sat down amidst the straw and looked about her for a moment or two. It was a hot afternoon, dazzlingly bright and almost breathlessly still. In front of her the dark green wheat rolled waist-high, and beyond it the vast sweep of whitened grass rolled back to the sky-line flooded with light. Far away, a team and a wagon slowly moved across it, but that was the only sign of life,

and no sound from the house reached them to break the heavy stillness.

Then she nerved herself to the effort, and spoke quietly for several minutes before she glanced at her companion. It was very evident that the latter had understood all that she had said, for she sat very still, with a hard, set face.

"Oh," she said, "if I'd thought you'd come to tell me this because you were vexed with me, I'd know what to do."

This was what Agatha had dreaded. It certainly looked as if she had come to triumph over her rival's humiliation, but Sally made it clear that she acquitted her of that intention.

"Still," she said, "I know that wasn't the reason, and I'm not mad with you. It hurts, but I know it's true." Then she turned to Agatha suddenly. "Why did you do it?"

"I thought you might save Gregory, if I told you."

"That was all?" and Sally looked at her with incredulous eyes.

"No," said Agatha simply, "that was only part. It did not seem right that Gregory should go against Wyllard's wishes, and gamble the Range away on the wheat market."

She stated this without hesitation, for she realized now exactly what had animated her to seek this painful interview. She was fighting Wyllard's battle, and that fact sustained her.

Sally winced. "Yes," she agreed. "I guess you had to tell me. He was fond of you. One could be proud of that. Harry Wyllard never did anything low-down and mean."

Agatha did not resent her candour. Although this was a thing she would scarcely have credited a little while ago, she saw that the girl felt the con-

trast between her lover's character and that of the man whose place he had taken. Then Agatha's eyes grew a trifle hazy.

"Wyllard, they think, is dead," she said in a low, strained voice. "You have Gregory still."

Sally looked at her with unveiled compassion, and Agatha did not shrink from it.

"Yes," she said, with a simplicity that became her, "and Gregory must have some one to—take care of him. I must do it if I can."

There was no doubt that Agatha was stirred. This half-taught girl's quiet acceptance of the burden that many women must carry once more made her almost ashamed.

"We will leave it to you," she said.

There was, however, another side to Sally's character, for her manner changed, and the suggestive hardness crept back into her eyes.

"Well," she said, "I'd most been expecting something of this kind when I heard that man Edmonds was going to the Range. He has a pull on Gregory, but he's not going to feel happy when I get hold of him."

She rose in another moment, and, saying nothing further, walked back towards the house, in front of which they came upon Mrs. Hastings. Sally looked at the latter significantly.

"I'm going over to the Range after supper," she informed her.

Mrs. Hastings drove away with Agatha, and said very little to her during the journey; but an hour after they had reached the homestead, she slipped into the girl's room, and found her lying in a big chair, sobbing bitterly. She sat down close beside her and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"I don't think Sally could have said anything to trouble you like this," she said.

Agatha turned a wet, white face towards her, and saw gentle sympathy in her eyes. There was no cause for reticence.

"No," she said, "it was the contrast between us. She has Gregory."

"And you have lost Harry. But I think you have not lost him altogether. We do not know that he is dead; but even if it is so, it was all that was finest in him he offered you. It is yours still."

She broke off, and sat silent for an interval before she went on again.

"My dear, it is, perhaps, cold comfort, and I am not sure that I can make what I feel quite clear. Still, Harry was only human, and it is almost inevitable that, had it all turned out differently, he would have said and done things that would have offended you. Now he has left you a purged and stainless memory—one, I think, which must come very near to the reality. The man who went up there—for an idea, a fantastic point of honour—sloughed off every taint of the baseness that hampers most of us in doing it. It was a man changed, and uplifted above all petty things by a high chivalrous purpose who made that last grim journey."

Agatha realized the truth of this. Already Wylard's memory had become etherealized, and she treasured it as a very fine and precious thing. Still, though he now wore immortal laurels, that would not content her when all her human nature cried out for his bodily presence. She wanted him, as she had grown to love him, in the warm, erring flesh, and the vague, splendid vision was cold and far remote. There was a barrier greater than that of crashing ice and bitter water between them.

"Oh," she said. "I have felt that! I try to feel it always, but just now it's not enough."

Then she turned her face away with a bitter sob,

and Mrs. Hastings, who stooped and kissed her, went out quietly. She knew what had come about, and that the girl had broken down at last after months of strain.

In the meanwhile, it happened that Edmonds, the mortgage broker, drove over to the Range, and found Hawtrey waiting him in Wyllard's room. It was early in the evening, and he could see the hired men busy outside tossing prairie hay from the wagons into the great barn. They were half-naked and grimed with dust, but Hawtrey, who was dressed in store clothes, had taken no share in their labours. When Edmonds came in, he turned to him with anxiety in his face.

"Well?" he said sharply.

"Market's a little stiffer," Edmonds answered.

He sat down and stretched out his hand towards the cigar-box on the table, while Hawtrey waited impatiently until he had picked one out.

"Still moving up?" he asked.

Edmonds nodded. "It's the other folks' last stand," he said. "With the wheat ripening as it's doing, the flood that will pour in before the next two months are out will sweep them off the market. I was half afraid from your note that this rally had some weight with you, and that, as one result of it, you meant to cover now."

"That," admitted Hawtrey, "was in my mind."

"Then," said his companion, "it's a pity."

Hawtrey leaned upon the table with hesitation in his face and attitude. He had neither the courage nor the steadfastness to make a gambler, and every fluctuation of the market swayed him to and fro. He had a good deal of wheat to deliver by and by, and—for prices had fallen steadily until a week or two ago—he could still secure a very desirable margin if he bought in against his sales now. Unfortunately,

however, he had once or twice lost heavily in an unexpected rally, and he greatly desired to recoup himself. Then, he had decided, nothing would tempt him to take part in another deal.

"If I hold on, and the market stiffens further, I'll be awkwardly fixed," he said. "Wyllard made a will, and in a few months I'll have to hand everything over to his executors. There would naturally be unpleasantness over a serious shortage."

Edmonds smiled. He had handled his man cleverly, and had now a reasonably secure hold upon him and the Range, but he was far from satisfied. If Hawtrey made a further loss, he would, in all probability, become irretrievably involved.

"Then," he pointed out, "there's every reason why you should try to get straight."

Hawtrey admitted it. "Of course," he said. "You feel sure I could do it by holding on?"

His companion seldom answered a question of this kind. It was apt to lead to unpleasantness afterwards.

"Well," he said, "Beeman and Oliphant and Barstow are operating for a fall. One would fancy that you were safe in following their lead. When men of their weight sell forward, figures go down."

This was correct, as far as it went, but Edmonds was aware that the gentlemen alluded to usually played a very deep and obscure game. He had also reasons for believing that they were doing so now. It was, however, evident that his companion's hesitation was vanishing.

"It's a big hazard, but I feel greatly tempted to hang on," he said.

Edmonds, who disregarded this, sat smoking quietly. Since he was tolerably certain as to what the result would be, he felt it was now desirable to let Hawtrey decide for himself, in which case it would

be impossible for the latter to reproach him afterwards. Wheat, it seemed very probable, would fall still farther when the harvest began, but he had reasons for believing that the market would rally first. In that case, Hawtrey, who had sold forward largely, would fall altogether into his hands, and he looked forward with very pleasurable anticipation to enforcing his claim upon the Range. In the meanwhile, he was unobtrusively watching his companion's face, and inferred that Hawtrey would adopt the course suggested, when there was a rattle of wheels outside. Edmonds, who saw a broncho team and a wagon appear from behind the barn, realized that he must decide the matter at once.

"As I want to reach Lander's before it's dark, I'll have to get on," he said carelessly. "If you'll give me a letter to the broker, I'll send it to him."

Next moment a clear voice rose up outside.

"I guess you needn't worry," it said; "I'll go right in."

Then, while Gregory started, Sally walked into the room.

Edmonds was disconcerted, but he made her a bow and then sat down again, quietly determined to wait, for he fancied there was hostility in the swift glance she flashed at him.

"That's a smart team you were driving, Miss Creighton," he said.

Sally, who disregarded this, turned to Hawtrey.

"What's he doing here?" she asked.

"He came on a matter of business," Hawtrey answered.

"You have been selling wheat again?"

Hawtrey looked embarrassed, for her manner was not conciliatory. "Well," he confessed, "I have sold some."

"Wheat you haven't got?"

Hawtreys did not answer, and Sally sat down. Her manner indicated that she meant to investigate the matter thoroughly, and Edmonds, who would have greatly preferred to get rid of her, decided that, as this appeared impossible, he would appeal to her cupidity. The Creightons were grasping folks, and he had heard of her engagement to Hawtreys.

"If you will permit me, I'll try to explain," he began. "We'll say that you have reason for believing that wheat will go down, and you tell a broker to sell it forward at a price a little below the actual one. If other people do the same, it drops faster, and before you have to deliver, you can buy it for less than you sold it at. A good many dollars can be picked up that way."

"It looks easy," Sally agreed, with something in her manner which led him to fancy he might win her over. "Of course, prices have been falling. Gregory has been selling down?"

"He has. In fact, there's already a margin to his credit," said Edmonds, unsuspectingly.

"That is, if he bought in now, he'd have cleared—several thousand dollars?"

Edmonds told her exactly how much, and then started in sudden consternation, with rage in his heart, for she turned to Hawtreys imperiously.

"Then you'll write your broker to buy in right away," she said.

There was an awkward silence, during which the two men looked at one another until Edmonds spoke.

"Are you wise in suggesting this, Miss Creighton?" he asked.

Sally laughed harshly. "Oh, yes," she said, "it's a sure thing. And I don't suggest; I tell him to get it done."

She turned again to Hawtreys, who sat very still,

looking at her with a flush in his face. "Take your pen and give him that letter to the broker now."

There was this in her favour—Hawtrey was to some extent relieved by her persistence. He had not the nerve of the successful speculator, and he had already felt uneasy about the hazard he would incur by waiting. Besides, although prices had slightly advanced, he could still secure a reasonable margin if he covered his sales. In any case, he did as she bade him, and in another minute or two he handed Edmonds an envelope.

The latter, who rose, took it from him quietly, for he was one who could face defeat.

"Well," he said resignedly, "I'll send the thing on. If Miss Creighton will excuse me, I'll tell your man to get out my wagon."

Then he went out, and Sally turned to Hawtrey with the colour in her cheeks and a flash in her eyes.

"It's Harry Wyllard's money," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

WYLLARD COMES HOME

HARVEST had begun at the Range, and the clashing binders were moving through the grain when Hawtrey sat one afternoon in Wyllard's room at the Range. It was about five o'clock, and every man belonging to the homestead was toiling bare-armed and grimed with dust among the yellow oats, but Hawtrey sat at a table gazing at the litter of papers in front of him with a troubled face. He wore a white shirt and smart clothes, which was distinctly unusual in case of a Western farmer at harvest-time, and Edmonds, the mortgage jobber, leaned back in a big chair watching him.

The latter had called at a singularly inconvenient time, and Hawtreys was anxious to get rid of him before the guests he expected arrived. It was Sally's birthday, and since she took pleasure in simple festivities of any kind, he had arranged to celebrate it at the Range. He was, however, sufficiently acquainted with his companion's character to know that it was most unlikely that he would take his departure before he had accomplished the purpose which had brought him there. This was to collect several thousand dollars.

Hawtreys was in an unpleasantly tight place. Edmonds held a bond upon his homestead, teams, and implements as security for a short date loan, repayment of which was due, and he was to be married to Sally in a month or so.

"Can't you wait?" he asked at length.

"I'm afraid not," was the uncompromising reply. "Money's scarce this fall, and things have gone against me. Besides, you could pay me off if you wanted to."

Edmonds turned towards an open window, and glanced at the great stretch of yellow grain that ran back across the prairie. Dusty teams and binders, with flashing wooden arms, moved half-hidden along the edge of it, and the still, clear air was filled with a clash and clatter and the rustle of the flung-out sheaves.

There was no doubt that money could be raised upon that harvest field. Indeed, Hawtreys fancied that his companion would be content to take a bond for the delivery of so many thousand bushels in repayment of the loan; but having already gone farther than he had at one time contemplated doing, this was a course he shrank from suggesting. For the grain was Wyllard's, and there was the difficulty that Harry might still come back, while, if he did not,

an absence of another few months would entitle his executors to presume him dead. In either case, Hawtreys would be required to account for his property.

"No," he said, "I can't take—that way."

There was a trace of contempt in the mortgage jobber's smile. "You of course understand just how you're fixed, but that draft of the arrangement with Wyllard gave you the power to do pretty much what you like. Moreover, if you gave me a bond on as much of that grain as would wipe out the loan at the present figure, it would only mean that you would have Wyllard's trustees for creditors instead of me, and it's probable that they wouldn't be as hard upon you as I'm compelled to be. As things stand, you have got to square up, or I must throw your place on the market."

Hawtreys's face betrayed his dismay, and his companion fancied that he would yield to a little further pressure. He had not said anything about the mortgage to Sally, and it would be singularly unpleasant to be turned out upon the prairie within a month or two of his marriage, for he could not count upon being left in possession of the Range much longer.

"I'm only entitled to handle Wyllard's money on his account," he objected.

Edmonds appeared to reflect. "So far as I can remember, there was nothing of that kind stated in the draft of the arrangement. It empowered you to do anything you thought fit with the money, but it's altogether your own affair. I can get my dollars back by selling up your homestead, and I have to decide whether that must be done or not before I leave."

He had very little doubt as to what the decision would be. Hawtreys would yield, and afterwards

it would not be difficult to draw him into some unwise speculation with the object of getting the money back, which he imagined that Hawtreay would be desperately anxious to do. As the result of this, he expected to get such a hold upon the Range that he would be master of the situation when the property fell into the hands of Wyllard's trustees. That Hawtreay would be disgraced as well as ruined did not concern him.

Gregory took up one of the papers, and read it through with vacillation in his eyes. Then he rose, and stood leaning on the table, while he gazed at the teams toiling amidst the grain. There was wealth enough yonder to release him from his torturing anxieties, and something must surely turn up before the reckoning was due. It was not in his nature to face a crisis, and with him a trouble seemed ended if it could only be postponed. Edmonds, who knew the kind of man he had to deal with, said nothing further, and quietly reached out for another cigar.

In the meanwhile, though neither of the men was aware of it, Sally had just got down from her wagon on the other side of the house, and another couple of teams were already growing larger upon the sweep of whitened prairie. As she entered the homestead, she met Mrs. Nansen, and the latter informed her that Hawtreay was busy with Edmonds in Wyllard's room. Sally's eyes sparkled when she heard it, and her face grew hard.

"That man!" she said. "I guess I'll go right in to them."

In another minute she opened the door, and answered the mortgage jobber's greeting with a frigid stare. Having some experience of Sally's directness, he was inclined to fancy that the game was up, but he said nothing, and she fixed her eyes on Hawtreay.

"What's this man doing here again?" she asked. "You promised me you would never make another deal with him."

"I haven't made another deal; it's—a previous one," he answered lamely.

Sally swung round on Edmonds. "You have come here for money? You may as well tell me. I won't leave you with Gregory until you do."

It was plain that she would make her promise good, and Edmonds nodded.

"Yes," he said, "about three thousand dollars."

"And Gregory can't pay you?"

Edmonds reflected rapidly, and decided to take a bold course. He was acquainted with Hawtrey's habit of putting things off, and fancied that the latter would seize upon the first loophole of escape from an embarrassing situation. That was why he gave him a lead.

"Well," he said, "there is a way in which he could do it if he wished. He has only to fill in a paper and hand it to me."

He had, however, not counted on Sally's knowledge of his victim's affairs, or her quickness of wit, for she turned to Hawtrey imperiously.

"Where are you going to get the three thousand dollars?" she asked.

The blood crept into Hawtrey's face, for this was a thing he could not tell her; but a swift suspicion flashed into her mind as she looked at him.

"Perhaps it could be—raised," he said.

"To pay his mortgage off?" and Sally swung round on Edmonds now.

"Yes," the latter admitted. "He can easily do it."

Then the girl turned to Hawtrey. "Gregory," she said with harsh incisiveness, "there's only one way you could get that money, and it isn't yours."

Hawtrey said nothing, but he could not meet her

gaze, and when he turned from her, she looked back at the mortgage broker.

"If you're gone before I come back, there'll be trouble," she informed him, and sped swiftly out of the room.

Then Hawtreysat down limply in his chair, and Edmonds laughed savagely. The game was up, but if he got his three thousand dollars, he would be satisfied, for he had already extracted a good many from Hawtreys one way or another.

"If I were you, I'd marry that girl right away," he said. "You'd be safer if you had her to look after you."

Hawtreys let the gibe pass. He felt that it was warranted, and his anxiety was too strong for anger.

In the meanwhile, Sally ran out of the house to meet Hastings, who had just handed his wife down from their wagon, and drew him a pace or two aside.

"I'm worried about Gregory," she said; "he's in trouble—big trouble. Somehow we have got to raise three thousand dollars. Edmonds is with him."

Hastings did not seem greatly astonished. "Ah," he said, "I guess it's over that mortgage of his. It would be awkward for you and Gregory if Edmonds took the homestead and turned him out."

Sally's face blanched but she met his gaze steadily.

"Oh," she said, "that's not what I would mind the most."

Hastings reflected that this was a very unusual admission for the girl to make, and it suggested that Hawtreymight become involved in more serious difficulties. He had also a strong suspicion of what they were likely to be.

"Sally," he said quietly, "you are afraid of Edmonds making him do something you would not like?"

Though she did not answer directly, he saw the shame in the girl's face, and remembered that he was one of Wyllard's trustees.

"I must raise those dollars now, and I don't know where to get more than five hundred. I might manage that," she said.

"Well," said Hastings, "you want me to lend you them, and I'm not sure that I can. Still, if you'll wait a few minutes, I'll see what I can do."

Sally left him, and he turned to his wife, who had overheard part of what was said, and guessed the rest.

"You mean to raise that money? We are friends of his, and it may save him from—something that would trouble Sally very much," she said.

"I don't know how I can do it personally, in view of the figure wheat is standing at, and I don't think much of any security that Gregory could offer me. Still, there is, perhaps, a way in which it could be arranged, and it's one that, considering everything, is more or less admissible. I think I'll wait here for Agatha."

Agatha was in a wagon driven by Sproatly close behind them, and when he had handed her and Winifred down, Hastings, who walked to the house with them, drew Agatha into an unoccupied room, while Mrs. Nansen took the rest into the general one.

"Gregory's in serious trouble. Sally seems very anxious about him," he said. "It's rather a delicate subject, but I understand that you are on good terms with both of them?"

Agatha met his gaze with a smile. She fancied that what he really wished to discover was whether she still felt any bitterness against Gregory, and blamed him for pledging himself to Sally.

"Yes," she said, "Sally and I are good friends,

and I am very sorry to hear that Gregory is in some difficulty."

Hastings still seemed embarrassed, and she was becoming puzzled by his manner.

"Once upon a time you would have done anything to make things easier for him," he said. "I wonder if I might ask whether you have that feeling still?"

"Of course. If he is in serious trouble, I should be glad to do anything within my power to help him."

"Even if it cost six hundred pounds?"

Agatha gazed at him in bewildered astonishment. "I have about twenty dollars which your wife gave me not long ago."

"Still, if you had the money, you would be glad to help him and would not regret it afterwards?"

"No," said Agatha decisively. "If I had the means, and the need was urgent, I should be glad to do what I could." Then she laughed. "I can't understand in the least how this is to the purpose."

"If you will wait for the next two or three months, I may be able to explain it to you," said Hastings. "In the meanwhile, there are one or two things I have to do."

When he left her, Agatha wondered what he meant, though she was willing to do what she could. His suspicion that she still cherished any sense of grievance against Gregory, because he was going to marry Sally, brought a scornful smile into her eyes. It was singularly easy to forgive Gregory that, for she knew him for what he was—shallow, indolent, shiftless, a man without depth of character. He had a few surface graces and a half-insolent forcefulness of manner which, in a curious fashion, was almost becoming. But there was nothing beneath the surface. When he had to face a crisis, he collapsed like a pricked bladder, which was the first simile she

could think of, however inelegant. He was, it seemed, quite willing that a woman should help him out of the trouble he had involved himself in, for she had no doubt that Sally had sent Hastings on his somewhat incomprehensible errand.

Then a clear voice came in through the window, and, turning towards it, she heard a young lad clad in blue duck singing as he drove his binder through the grain. The song was a very simple one which had some vogue upon the prairie, but her eyes grew suddenly hazy as odd snatches of it reached her through the beat of hoofs, the clash of the binder's arms, and the rustle of the flung-out sheaves—

My Bonny's over the ocean,
My Bonny's far over the sea.

Then he called to his horses, and it was a few moments before she heard again—

Bring back my Bonny to me.

A quiver ran through her as she leaned upon the window-frame. There was a pathos in the simple strain, and she could fancy that the lad, who was clearly English, as an exile, felt it too. Once more, as the jaded horses and clashing machine grew smaller down the edge of the great sweep of yellow grain, his voice came faintly up to her with its haunting thrill of longing and regret—

Bring back my Bonny to me.

This, in her case, was more than any one could do, and as she stood listening, a tear fell upon her closed hands. The man, by comparison with whom Gregory appeared a mere lay figure, was lying dead far up in the solitudes of the frozen North, with his last grim journey done. This time, however, he had not carried her picture with him. Gregory was to blame for that, and it was the one thing she could not forgive him.

She leaned against the window for another minute, struggling with an almost uncontrollable longing, and looking out upon the sweep of golden wheat and whitened grass with brimming eyes, until there was a rattle of wheels, and she saw Edmonds drive away. In another minute she heard voices in the corridor. Hastings was speaking to his wife.

"I've got rid of the man, and it's reasonable to expect that Gregory will keep clear of him after this," he said.

"Don't you mean that Agatha did it?"

Agatha became intent as she heard her name. She did not hear the answer, however, and Mrs. Hastings spoke again.

"Allen," she said, "you don't keep a secret badly, though Harry pledged you not to tell. Still, all that caution was unnecessary. It was, of course, the very thing he would do."

"What did he do?" Hastings asked; and Agatha heard his wife's soft laugh, for they were just outside the door now.

"Left the Range, or most of it, to Agatha, in case he didn't come back again."

They went on, and Agatha, turning from the window, sat down helplessly, her face flushed and her heart beating horribly fast. Wyllard's last care, it seemed, had been to provide for her, and that fact brought her a curious sense of solace. In an unexplainable fashion it took the bitterest sting out of her grief, though how far he had succeeded in his intentions did not matter in the least. It was sufficient to know that, amidst all the haste of his preparation, he had not forgotten her.

Then, becoming calmer, she understood what had been in Hastings' mind during the interview that had puzzled her, and was glad that she assured him of her willingness to sacrifice anything that might

be hers if it was needed to set Gregory free. It was what Wyllard would have done. He had said that Gregory was a friend of his, and that, she knew, meant a good deal with him.

However, she must join the others if she did not wish her absence to excite undesirable comment, and, going out, she came face to face with Sally in the corridor. The girl stopped, and saw the sympathy in her eyes.

"Yes," she said impulsively, "I've saved him. Edmonds has gone. Hastings bought him off, and, though I don't know how, you helped him. He stayed behind for you."

Agatha smiled. The vibrant relief in her companion's voice stirred her, and she realized that in choosing this half-taught girl, Gregory had acted with wholly unusual wisdom. With a sense of half-contemptuous amusement at her folly, she remembered how she had once fancied that he was marrying beneath him. Sally was far from perfect, but in the matter of essentials, the man was not fit to brush her shoes.

"My dear," she said, "I really don't know exactly what I—have—done, but if it amounts to anything, it is a pleasure to me."

Then they went together into the general room, where Gregory was talking to Winifred somewhat volubly. Agatha, however, fancied from his manner that he had, at least, the grace to feel ashamed of himself. Supper, she heard Mrs. Nansen say, would be ready very shortly, and, feeling in no mood for conversation, she sat near a window, looking out across the harvest field, until she heard a distant shout and saw a wagon appear on the crest of the rise. Then, to her astonishment, two of the binders stopped, and a couple of men sprang down from them and ran to meet the wagon. More of the teams stopped, and a clamour went up, while here and there little

running figures straggled up the slope. By now her companions clustered about her at the window, wondering, and Winifred turned to Hastings.

"What are they shouting for?" she asked. "They are all crowding about the wagon."

Agatha felt suddenly dazed and dizzy, for she knew what the answer to that question must be even before Mrs. Hastings spoke.

"It's Harry coming back," she said with a gasp.

In another moment they streamed out of the house, and Agatha found it scarcely possible to follow them, for the revulsion of feeling had almost overpowered her. Still, she reached the door, and saw the wagon drawn up amidst a group of struggling men, and by and by Wyllard, whom they surrounded, break away as if by force from the midst of them. She stood on the threshold awaiting him, and in the midst of her exultation a pang smote her as she saw how gaunt and worn he was. He came straight towards her, regardless of the others, and, clasping the hands she held out, led her into the house.

"So you have not married Gregory yet?" he said, and laughed triumphantly when he saw the answer in her shining eyes.

"No," she said softly, "I shall never marry him."

Wyllard drew her towards him with a compelling grasp.

"Why?" he asked.

"I was waiting for you," was all she said.

THE END

